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"WHO ARE YOU?" THE BAFFLED WOMAN CRIED AS SHE DROPPED BACK INTO HER CHAIR. "THEY CALL ME HERE THE GOLD REVOLVER SHARP."

OR,

Redfern, the Secret Service Scout.

A Romance of the Rough Southwest.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING AT THE SCHOOL-HOUSE.

"Oh! I have forgotten my history, and to-morrow is examination. I must go back for it."
"I will accompany you, Miss Ethel, if you will permit me that pleasure."

"Certainly, Gray."

With the last remark two of a group of a dozen lads and lassies, varying in ages from twelve to sixteen, wheeled their ponies and sped at a gallop back down the path they had come through the woodland.

It was a party of children on their way home from school, and the scene was on the Eastern shore of Maryland, where the farms were large, the houses consequently far apart, so that nearly two-thirds of the scholars, boys and girls, rode to and fro daily.

"A smile was upon the faces of several, at the return of the two, and one young girl of sixteen said spitefully:

"Ethel Enders left her history on purpose, for she knew Gray St. John would go back with her after it."

"It does look so, Miss Laura, and I think it's a gone case with both of them," a youth remarked.

"Well, he has a dangerous rival in Hugh Hammond, for he has sworn he'll cut Gray out."

"Or kill him, he said to me," added a youth.

"Oh, there he is now," said Laura Hastings.

The little cavalcade were just turning into the highway, from the path through the woodland, when they saw seated upon his horse, as though awaiting them, a youth of eighteen.

He was richly dressed, the horse he rode was a thoroughbred, the trappings were costly, and the general appearance of the rider was that he was of wealthy parentage.

His face was a fine one, at first glance, but a closer look revealed the fact that there was much of evil in it, that he had a temper of fire, and a peculiar look in, or feature of, his eyes which it was hard to account for, until the nature of it was indicated. He had *one blue and one gray eye*, and each had a different expression.

He glanced over the group, and, with a frown, asked:

"Dick Burdett, where is Gray St. John?"

All knew that he meant Ethel Enders, though, and Laura Hastings smiled wickedly at Dick Burdett's reply:

"He did not come on with us, Hugh."

"No; he went back with Ethel, *who forgot her history*," said Laura, viciously.

"Well, I wanted to see Gray," and with this Hugh Hammond touched his spurs to his thoroughbred mare, and dashed up the woodland.

He had a rifle, silver-mounted and with handsomely carved stock, swinging from his saddle-born, for nearly all of the boys carried their guns to school with them, often bagging a fair amount of game on the way.

The two who had gone back after the forgotten history, proved that Laura Hastings's remark, though said maliciously, as she was herself desperately in love with Gray St. John, hit pretty near the truth, for Ethel Enders said:

"I wished to speak with you, Gray, and then remembered my history, so I get the chance, after all."

She was a girl of fifteen, with an exquisitely graceful form, a face of rare loveliness, and stamped with a character beyond her years.

She was the belle of the school and the neighborhood, and though all the lads had fallen in love with her, she had not lost, by her successful rivalry, any of her girl friends, unless it was Laura Hastings.

"She just can't help being lovely, and so is not to blame," one girl had declared.

Two years before an old bachelor living in comfort on his farm had died, and Ethel Enders had been his heiress, so she and her mother, all there were of the family, came there to live.

All the neighbors had liked them at once, but there had sprung up a rivalry between Gray St. John, the son of a poor widow, and Hugh Hammond, the heir to the richest estate on the eastern shore of Maryland.

Hugh's father, the district judge, had held high hopes of his boy and sent him to the Naval Academy; but, after a year, he was dismissed and returned home to again attend the country school, which was taught by an abler man than is often found outside of colleges.

Gray St. John worked hard on the farm and yet stood at the head of his class in school.

A handsome fellow he was, too, a favorite with all, and with a noble nature that won him friends and admirers among old and young.

"Well, Ethel, what have you to tell me?" asked Gray, for, away from the others, he dropped the formal miss before her name.

"It is to warn you against Hugh Hammond. He was over at our house yesterday, and boldly told me that I should one day marry him, and said that he believed I loved you."

"And your answer, Ethel?"

"I told him that I loved you, and had told you so, and then he threatened to make me regret my frankness; but I could not help it, Gray."

"I do not fear his threats, Ethel; but he must

let you alone, for others have told me how he persecutes you. But, here we are at the school-house, and I'll soon get your history."

"Let me hold your rifle and horse, Gray."

He handed her the rein, but kept his rifle, and dismounting, entered the school house.

It was a picturesque old building, standing in the midst of a forest, and on the bank of a small stream.

Upon trees scattered here and there were boxes, just for the horses of the children to have their noonday lunch, which was brought to school for them.

The school had once been a church, and near it was an old graveyard, the tombstones overgrown with moss and crumbling to decay.

Rustic arbors the children had built here and there in the woods, and there was a board table for them to eat their luncheon on, and a happy picnic this noonday meal was for them, every day.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUEL.

"OH! why has he come here?"

The words came from the lips of Ethel Enders, as suddenly came into view, advancing from the woodland path, Hugh Hammond.

He was in an angry mood, for his face was white, his eyes having a wicked glare in them.

"Well, Miss Enders, you came back with that fellow for a lovers' talk, did you?" he demanded in a low, menacing tone.

"Mr. Hammond, I beg you to go away, for I care for no trouble between you and Gray St. John, and he is not one to submit to my being insulted, or himself either."

"Ah! Then he is the very one I wish to meet, for I came to insult him, and feared he had not the courage to meet me."

"This is unmanly in you, sir, and you show a coward heart," retorted Ethel with an angry flash in her fine eyes.

"Ha! you fling it into my face that I am a coward do you?"

"Well, your lover shall answer for that insult."

"For fear you may not understand it, Hugh Hammond, and desire to put it upon a young girl, let me tell you that I say you are a coward," and Gray St. John stepped into the door of the school-room:

He had Ethel's history in one hand, his rifle in the other, and having overheard what Hugh Hammond had said, he was in no humor to stand trifling.

"That is just what I wished you to say, Gray St. John, for it gives me the right to thrash you right here—no, to force you to meet me in a duel, as gentlemen should with their affairs, for I will overlook the fact that you are no gentleman."

"I will meet you at any time, Hugh, though this quarrel is of your making, not mine."

"Now ride off and let me see Miss Ethel home."

"My time is now, boy."

"What do you mean?"

"You shall fight me now."

"Not in the presence of a lady?"

"I say yes."

"And I say no."

"Well, if you refuse, I shall strike you, and perhaps that may stir up your coward blood."

"Do not strike me, Hugh, for I am no coward, and will meet you to-morrow morning at any time and place you say."

"No, sir; I say *now*!" and riding nearer he suddenly slashed Gray across the face with his riding whip.

Instantly Gray St. John had him covered with his rifle, and cried in a voice that quivered with emotion:

"Now, sir, I shall kill you for that blow!"

"My God! don't kill me, Gray," cried the now thoroughly frightened youth, while Ethel called out quickly:

"No, no, Gray, not that!" Instantly the rifle was lowered, and Gray St. John said:

"Yes, it would be cowardly; but you shall answer to me for that blow, Hugh Hammond, cur that you are!"

"Let it be now, then."

"Ethel, will you ride on home alone?"

"No, Gray, I will remain and go with you."

"Then you must witness a duel, and the death of your lover, Ethel Enders."

"So be it; I will remain to see that you do not murder him, for if you do, you shall hang for it," was the bold reply.

"What if he should kill me?" sneered Hugh Hammond.

"Then it would be a good riddance to the

community, and my testimony would show that you forced this fight upon him."

"Well, he shall meet me, and now, and you can see fair play."

"No, Hugh Hammond, to meet before this lady is revolting to me."

"Well, if you do not, I shall lay my whip over your shoulders this time."

"Oh, Ethel! what shall I do?" pleaded Gray.

"As Hugh Hammond gives you no alternative, Gray, meet him!" was the plucky response, and she added, as she slipped from her saddle to the ground:

"And I shall step off the ground, give the word, and see fair play, and upon your head be the result of this duel, Hugh Hammond, for you have sought it," and Ethel's eyes were ablaze as she uttered the words.

Hugh Hammond gave a mocking laugh of triumph, while Gray St. John looked very serious, for it went against him in every way, this duel before the young and beautiful girl he loved so dearly.

"Hugh Hammond, will not the man in you let this meeting be delayed until another time?" begged Gray.

"That your lady-love may have the law stop us, and thus save you from proving a coward before my rifle?"

"Oh, no, not that, for I do not fear to meet you, though I will not kill, as I warn you now I shall only break your aim."

"Ha! ha! how generous; but I shall kill you, remember that."

"If you can; so take your stand if it must be."

Ethel herself stepped off fifty paces and marked the spots where the two were to stand.

She placed Hugh Hammond with his back to the school-house door, for he demanded that position, and Gray fifty paces distant.

She knew that both youths were good shots, Gray St. John being noted as the dead-shot of the neighborhood, and as she bade him take his position, she said in a whisper:

"Don't kill him, Gray, but fire quickly and wound him, thus saving your life and his."

"Such is my intention, Ethel; but if I should fail, remember always through life your boy lover."

"I will, Gray, and *avenge you*," was the almost savage response of the young girl.

"Ho, there, you are plotting against me, I guess."

"Lucky I have my rifle in my hand, or you might draw the bullet out," said Hugh Hammond, with a sneer.

Neither Gray or Ethel made any reply, and the former took his stand.

"I will give the word:

"Are you ready? One! two! three! fire!"

"And remember, I stand as a witness against you, Hugh Hammond, if you fire before the word."

"Ah! and how about your lover?"

"My lover will act as a gentleman of honor should."

"You seem to know the dueling code strangely well for a girl?" sneered Hugh Hammond.

"I saw a duel when I was but eight years old, and it was a fatal one, for *my father fell at the first fire*."

Then raising her voice, Ethel Enders called out:

"Are you ready?"

"One! two! three! fire!"

Gray St. John fired two seconds the quickest. Hugh Hammond's shot followed, and—

Gray St. John dropped in his tracks like a dead man.

CHAPTER III.

THE FLIGHT.

"OH, Heaven have mercy! You have killed him, Hugh Hammond!" and Ethel ran to the fallen youth and dropped on her knees by his side.

"You'll find the wound in his heart, sweet Ethel, for I aimed to still its beating," sneered young Hammond, coming forward.

And then he added:

"But, it was a fair duel, as you can testify, and of course I am not to blame."

The wound was over the heart, as Ethel saw; but she saw also that the youth was not dead, and heard his whispered words:

"There was no bullet in my rifle, Ethel."

She sprang to her feet and ran to the door of the school-house.

Eagerly she glanced over it and saw no bullet-mark there.

Then, with livid face, she turned upon Hugh Hammond and cried:

The Rival Sharps.

"Hugh Hammond, you have murdered Gray St. John, for you borrowed his rifle to-day and drew out the bullet, and came here to kill him."

"You are unhurt, and there is no bullet in this door, which was behind you."

"You shall hang for this, I swear it!"

With a cry of terror the youth sprung toward his horse, threw himself upon his back and rode away like the wind.

But she did not heed him, for, going to Gray's side, she said:

"I will go for help, for you shall not die, Gray. No! no! no! you shall not die!"

A moment more and she was in her saddle riding at full speed through the woodland road, while the wounded lad lay there where he had fallen, his rifle by his side.

Never before had she so urged her horse with the whip; but it was over a mile to the doctor's, and she knew how much depended upon her getting his aid for poor Gray.

Up the avenue to his house she dashed, just as he had finished his supper and was going out to see a patient.

"Doctor Parsons, Gray St. John is lying at the school-house, I fear fatally wounded, so please go to him, while I hasten on to his house to send the carriage and help for him."

With this she was gone, but she knew how much Dr. Parsons liked Gray, and saw him spring into his sulky and dash away at a speed that surprised his staid old horse.

Soon she arrived at Gray St. John's home, a snug little cottage with a well-tilled farm about it.

A woman with a refined and pleasant face met her and heard the story; but she acted promptly, for Mrs. St. John was possessed of wonderful nerve.

She called to her farm-hand and had him hitch the horses to the carriage, and back with her in the gloaming rode Ethel, telling the story as John went along at a rattling pace.

It was just dark when they reached the spot, and found there Dr. Parsons, seated by the side of the wounded boy.

"Is he dead?" asked Mrs. St. John with strange calmness.

"No, and I believe we can fetch him round."

"I extracted the ball, which barely missed the heart."

"Let us raise him carefully," and this was done, the good doctor riding in the carriage with his patient and Mrs. St. John, while Ethel followed in the sulky.

Arriving at the farm, Gray was placed in his mother's large, pleasant room, and the wound was carefully dressed.

Then the doctor called Ethel out upon the piazza and asked:

"How did this happen, my child?"

In a few terse words she told the story, and added:

"Now, doctor, I am going to ride to the house of Judge Hammond and demand a warrant for the arrest of his son."

"Ethel, you have got the nerve of a man, and a brave one at that."

"If you had not come first for me, poor Gray would have bled to death; but it is night now, and your mother must be anxious about you, so I will drive by your house with you and then go to Judge Hammond's, for if there was no bullet in Gray's rifle and Hugh took it out, then it was a deliberate attempt at a cowardly murder."

"Come, my child, I will send some of the neighbors over to help Mrs. St. John, just as soon as I have seen you home, and given you some medicine, for you need it."

So Ethel rode off, the doctor following in his sulky, and arriving at her house her mother put her at once to bed and the doctor gave her a nerve, for she was now almost unnerved.

Then the good doctor stopped and sent a neighbor or two over to the St. John farm, and next wended his way to the grand home of Judge Hammond.

The judge had just finished his supper when the doctor was announced.

"Ho, Parsons, what brings you here without a call, for you never are at all social?" cried the judge.

"Is Hugh here, Judge Hammond?" seriously asked the doctor.

"No, the scamp is off skylarking somewhere."

"He is a sad case, Parsons, and I fear will give me trouble some day."

"He has done so now, Judge Hammond," and then Doctor Parsons told the story.

Judge Hammond turned deadly pale as he listened, now and then asking a question.

At length he said:

"I have feared this; but being my son does not help him, for I shall at once issue the war-

rant for his arrest, send for the constable and order him to serve it."

"Let me inquire if the servants know aught about him?"

The servants were called in and questioned, and the housekeeper, for the judge was a widower, said that Master Hugh had been home something over an hour before, and she had seen him writing a letter at his father's desk, which he also had opened with a key.

Then he rode away and carried a pair of well-filled saddle-bags with him, as he said to her he was going on a journey for a few weeks, on business for the judge.

The judge stepped to his desk and there found a letter addressed to him.

It was hastily written and as follows:

"DEAR FATHER:—

"I shot Gray St. John in a duel at the school-house this evening, and as charges may be made against me to cause me trouble, I borrow some cash from you and go out of the law's reach until the affair blows over, for I suppose St. John will die as I aimed for his heart."

"When I need more money will write you where to send it, for surely you will not wish your only son and heir to hang."

"Yours affectionately,

"HUGH."

CHAPTER IV.

THE OUTCAST.

THE doctor left the elegant house of the judge, and returned to his wounded patient, and the sorrowing father sent a servant at once to tell the constable to come to him.

Then he turned again to the letter which he had received from his wild, wayward boy.

He read it over while his stern face quivered, and glanced over the contents of his desk.

It was there that he kept the money which he frequently had in the house, until he could take it to the bank in the town.

Only his son besides himself knew the secret compartment in the desk, and this he opened.

"My God! he has taken all!"

"A murderer perhaps! a thief he certainly is, and my son," groaned the unhappy man.

For a long time he seemed too full of sorrow to speak, but at last said:

"Yes, all gone, and at this time, when my speculations have all proved worthless, and this money was intrusted to me to put in the bank."

"Ten thousand dollars gone?"

"Oh, Heaven have mercy upon me!"

He seemed crushed by the blow; but at last arose and went up-stairs to his son's room.

"He has taken some things with him— Ah! what is this?" and he picked up a ring from the floor.

"What! this is from my wife's jewel-case."

So saying he rushed to a wing of the house seldom visited, for it had been his wife's suite of rooms.

The key was in the door, having also been taken from his desk, and to a solid secretary between two windows he sprung.

"Great God! he has broken into the drawer and stolen his dead mother's jewels!"

With a groan the unhappy man sunk upon a chair and there remained for half an hour, until he heard the clatter of hoofs without.

Then he arose and hastened down-stairs, his face deadly pale, but stern and determined.

The county constable awaited him in the library, and was startled by the words:

"Constable Dunn, you are to get deputies at once, as many as you may need, and scour the country for Hugh Hammond, for I shall at once write out the warrant of arrest."

"Your son, sir?"

"Hugh Hammond, sir, I said, and you well know the relationship he bears to me; but that has nothing to do with it, as he is a fugitive from justice, having shot, perhaps fatally, young St. John this afternoon."

Arrest him, Constable Dunn, and should he resist, treat him as you would any other criminal."

The warrant was at once made out and signed, and getting what information he could as to the direction taken by the young fugitive, Constable Dunn departed.

And through the long hours of the night Judge Hammond paced the floor of his library, but at dawn dispatched a servant to ask Doctor Parsons how his patient was.

The doctor had just returned home and sent word that there was a hope of Gray's recovery, though he could hardly yet tell what the result would be.

Then Judge Hammond sat down and wrote a note to Ethel Enders, for the doctor had told him just how it all occurred.

He asked her to meet him at the school-house

at ten o'clock, for it being Saturday no scholars would be there.

Strange as it may seem, she had never seen the father of Hugh Hammond, but had always heard him spoken of as a noble man, with the one weakness of humoring a wild boy, his only son.

Her mother had driven over to the St. John cottage to learn just how Gray was, and so Ethel mounted her horse and rode away to the school-house.

The judge was there, she saw, as she approached, his horse being hitched near.

As he came forward she saw that his face was deadly pale, and something she saw there caused her to start and gaze at him in a fixed sort of way that puzzled him.

Ever courtly, he raised his hat and said in a kindly tone:

"My dear child, yesterday's tragedy was no scene for your beautiful eyes to rest upon; but I would hear the story from your lips."

She told him all, from how she had turned back with Gray St. John, and Hugh Hammond had come and forced a quarrel upon him.

"And where did Hugh stand in the duel?"

"Just here, sir, with this door at his back."

"How far distant?"

"At the foot of the step, sir, not two feet from the door."

"Young St. John is a dead shot, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"He fired a second or two first?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aid me to find where his bullet struck, please."

They searched in vain for it, and Ethel said:

"I am sorry to wound you, sir, but your son borrowed Gray's rifle during the afternoon, and I feel sure that he drew the bullet from it."

"Alas, my child, I can believe it; but Constable Dunn is on his track, and if he finds him he will find his father a merciless judge. And more: if that poor boy dies I will pass sentence of death upon my own son as I would upon any other criminal. If the constable does not find him, then from this day Hugh Hammond is an outcast from my heart and from his fellow-men. But why do you regard me so, my child?"

"Oh, merciful heaven! you are the one who killed my father in a duel! I know you now," cried Ethel, shrinking away from Judge Hammond as she would from a serpent.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNFORGOTTEN FACE.

A STARTLED cry broke from the lips of Judge Hammond at this bold charge against him from a young girl.

"I killed your father in a duel?" he said with a face quivering with emotion.

"Yes! I cannot forget your face. I remember it now—you are the man!" exclaimed Ethel, firmly and standing aloof, now, as if on guard.

"Pray tell me where you ever saw me before?"

"Did you not kill my father in a duel?"

"Girl, I never knew your father."

"Yes, I am not mistaken in your face."

"I resemble some one who has wronged you, my child."

"Did you never kill a man?"

"Alas! yes. It has been my misfortune to have that sin upon my conscience."

"Was it in a duel?"

"Yes."

"Did you not first fight with swords, and then you demanded a second meeting with pistols, although my father had spared your life?"

"Girl! who are you?"

"I am Ethel Enders."

"I know, but that is not your true name."

"Let me picture a scene to you, sir, and see if my memory is not good, if I do not recall your face."

"I will hear what you have to say," answered the judge sadly.

"Seven years ago my father lived in Virginia, our home being near the town of W—."

"One day a gentleman came there and had a long talk with my father, all of which I overheard."

"My mother was away upon a few days' visit, and my father did not heed my presence; but I heard enough to know that he was accused of some wrong which he denied, but for which satisfaction was demanded."

"At last my father yielded, and a duel was to be fought the following morning near our home, down in a glen through which a brook ran."

"I awoke early and slipping out of the house ran to the spot and hid, wondering in my child-like innocence what I should see, for I did not understand it all."

"My father came to the scene accompanied by

a neighbor, who carried a couple of swords. Then a carriage drove up and two gentlemen got out, and *you* were one of them.

"I saw the duel with swords, and my father disarmed you, but you demanded a second meeting with pistols, and I saw my father fall, and I must have fainted.

"When I came to I ran to the house, where all was in confusion, for my father *was* dead.

"It nearly killed my mother, and it was a terrible shock for me, a mere child.

"Who had shot my father no one knew, for he had died without a word; but he had left a letter for my mother telling her he had, in early life, done a grievous wrong, and was going to meet the one he had wronged in a duel, and, being a splendid swordsman, spare his life. If he fell, however, he would, by his death, atone for his crime.

"My mother sold her little home and went elsewhere, and two years ago her bachelor brother left us the farm where we now dwell.

"Now, sir, do you deny the charge I have made against you?"

"My poor child, I admit that years ago, under just such circumstances I fought a duel, but it was with one who had won the love of a sister whom I idolized, and deserting her on false charges trumped up by a rival, he broke her heart.

"Her love for him in the end turned to bitterest hatred, and she forced from me a pledge to avenge her.

"I kept my pledge and killed the man in a duel, fought as you describe; but his name was not Enders."

"Enders, sir, is my mother's maiden name, which she again took."

"And your father's name?" eagerly asked the judge.

"Armstrong, sir, Edgar Armstrong."

"You are right! my act smote your young heart a cruel blow, and now my son has dealt you a severer one, for I know that you loved the boy he may perhaps be the murderer of; but, for your sake, I say—God forbid that it should be so!

"But, tell me, my child, does your mother know who I am?"

"No, I only knew it by recalling your face."

"Do not tell her, I beseech you! And now let me go from your presence," and he turned sadly away, then once more stepped toward her, and in his courtly way said:

"Can I place you in your saddle, miss?"

"No, no! do not touch me!" and she shrunk back, while the look that crossed his face she never forgot.

Leading her horse to the block, she sprung into the saddle and rode away, while Judge Hammond mounted his horse and went slowly homeward.

The constable was there awaiting him, and made known that he had traced the fugitive youth to the Fred-Avon, where he had sold his horse, saddle and bridle, and taken passage upon a vessel bound down the coast.

"I would have done my duty, constable, had the boy been taken," the judge said, and added:

"Now I must seek rest, for I am ill."

And ill indeed the strong man was, for, only six weeks after he was borne to his grave.

It was found that his estate was mortgaged and he had died a bankrupt.

Gray St. John improved steadily, and, three months from the day of his being wounded, he returned once more to the country school which had so nearly been the scene of his death.

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS PLOT.

"JUAN, do you wish to make a hundred pesos with but half a day's work?"

"Yes, senor, very glad to make money—love money," was the candid reply.

"Well, I have a little game for you to play for which I will give you big money."

"Yes, senor; Juan ready."

"But, that bullet wound in your head you got last night in the camps?"

"It no hurt much, senor, but look bad: the bullet hit Juan's hard skull and turn up, so! see?"

"Yes, and that wound will come in well in the part I wish you to play."

"Yes, senor."

Of the two thus engaged in conversation one was a tall, splendidly formed man, dressed in the costume of a miner.

His hair was long, curling, and fell upon his broad shoulders, while his dark beard reached to his belt, in which he wore a handsome bowie and a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, the butts artistically carved.

He was clad in top-boots, a broad black sombrero and not far from him was a fine horse equipped most gorgeously with Mexican trappings.

The one with him was a Mexican, dark-faced cunning-eyed and with the look of a thorough villain.

He was dressed in the costume of his country and when the other rode up had been searching a stream for gold.

The scene was in the gold region of New Mexico, and far beyond all habitations, except a few mining-camps scattered here and there miles apart.

The time was more than eighteen years after the flight of Hugh Hammond, driven away by Ethel Enders's threat to have him hanged if Gray St. John died of the wound he had given him in the duel when but one rifle had been loaded with bullet.

"What senor have Juan do for so much money?" asked the Mexican.

"I'll tell you:—over in Yellow Canyon there is a miner who has been in this country only half a year, I find.

"I saw him the other night, and I wish to get acquainted with him in a way that will make us firm pals, do you see?"

"Yes, senor."

"Now I wish you to go to the Yellow Canyon and creep up near him, rifle in hand, for I have drawn here a map of the position you must take, just where he is and where I will be.

"When you are in position I will come along and fire, not at you, but over your head, and you will fall."

"Senor will not make mistake?"

"No, Juan, for I am your friend."

"Yes, senor save my life one time and me remember."

"You must take that bandage from your head, let the wound bleed a little as though it was just made, and pretend to be dead."

"It's bad luck, senor, for Juan might die."

"No, it is not bad luck."

The Mexican shook his head dubiously.

"Well, Juan, I will make it two hundred pesos."

"Bueno! Juan ready!"

"Let me see that wound."

He took the bandage from the head of the Mexican and a wound was revealed just over the left eye, where a bullet had struck and torn its way.

"That Revolver Sharp meant well, Juan."

"Yes, senor, he thought he kill me, for I play dead and then run off. *Caramba!* but I have his life, some time," savagely said the Mexican.

"Well, if you do not some one else will. I saw myself that you were cheating that old miner at cards, but said nothing and the Revolver Sharp chipped in on you.

"But now you are to play dead again; see?"

"Yes, senor."

"Well, here is the map, so go to the place at once, for it will be nearly sunset by the time you get there."

"Yes, senor."

The miner drew from his pocket a rudely drawn map, and the two studied it over together for some minutes; then the Mexican went off on foot, and the other, mounting his horse, soon after followed.

In the head of a large canyon, wild and rugged in the extreme, some three miles from where the horseman and the Mexican met and parted, a man was working steadily, pick in hand.

Near him lay a shovel, and, after digging for a short while with his pick, he would take up his shovel and scatter the loose earth to one side.

Then he would sit down and search it over carefully, separating some small yellow particles from the dirt and place them in his large red handkerchief which lay upon the ground near him.

"Fortune has indeed favored me, far sooner than I could have dreamed of, and if this lead holds good I will be a rich man and can return to my beloved wife and child.

"How Ethel must have rejoiced over the little bag of gold I sent her, and felt that I had kept my pledge to make her a rich woman after all the struggle we had in fighting poverty."

"Well, a year here, if this lead holds good, will make me a very rich man."

He paused in his work and leant upon his shovel.

It was a graceful attitude and displayed his fine form well.

His face was bronzed by exposure, his hair falling upon his neck and his beard of half a year's growth.

It was a striking face, resolute and full of intelligence, while there was a refinement in it

which his rude miner's dress and surroundings a did not mar.

"It is nearly sunset and I must be going to my cabin. To-morrow I will build a cabin here in the canyon so as to be near my work."

Hardly had he uttered the words when a shot rang out sharply and filled the canyon with many a ringing echo, as though a regiment of At riflemen had emptied their guns in a scattering fire at an enemy who had surprised them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWO MINERS.

At the crack of the rifle the miner sprang toward his belt of arms lying upon a rock near him.

Quickly he had them belted on and then seizing his rifle sprung to cover among the rocks.

What the shot meant he did not know; he could only guess that some one had fired at him and missed him.

But he was not left long in doubt, for a horseman rode into sight and called out in a hearty way:

"No danger now, pard, for yonder lies my game upon that rock."

He pointed toward a rock a hundred yards away where was visible a man's form, his hands grasping a rifle.

It lay all in heap, the body did, as though crouching upon hands and knees.

"Did you kill him, my friend?" asked the miner coming forward and gazing upon the horseman with peculiar interest in the glance.

"Yes, I was coming up the canyon and observed his movements, which were very suspicious and I felt sure he was after game of some kind so I dismounted and watched him."

"I heard the sound of a pick, and then I knew that it was a man-hunt he was on."

"I could not see you, but I saw that he was a Mexican and determined to save whoever he meant to kill by knocking him over; so, just as he was preparing to fire, I threw my rifle up and pulled trigger."

"I am glad I happened this way, pard, but it was an accident, for I have lost my bearings."

"I owe you my life, sir, and those who love me will bless you for this deed as I do. Heaven ever guard you, sir, and let me tell you that in Gray St. John you have a life-long friend," and the miner spoke with emotion.

"Well, pard, I am glad of your friendship, for its a scarce commodity in these parts where every man's hand is against you; but you are not long in the mining country, I take it?"

"No, sir, only six months; but may I ask your name, and if you are a miner, too?"

"Yes, I am a miner and have a little lead some score of miles from here which pays me fairly well, though I have not struck it rich thus far."

"But you asked my name, so I will tell you that in the mines I am known as the Lone Star Sharp, for I am from Texas, as you see by the star on my hat, and I play, the boys say, a rattling sharp game of cards, while I'm rather quick with my weapons."

"But my name, pard, is Trent Baxter. I'm a Texan, as I said, and running into a streak of bad luck I came to the mines to help myself out financially."

"Well, Mr. Baxter, I certainly am happy to know you. You are lost, you say?"

"Yes, I took the wrong trail back to Yellow Canyon, and it brought me here. Am on my way to the camps to make some purchases."

"Then spend the night in my cabin, I beg you, for it is a short mile away. But, is that man dead?"

"Of course, for I shoot to kill."

"It is a virtue one must possess in this wild country—pard—pard—I forget the name."

"Gray St. John."

"Well, while you get your tools together, Mr. St. John, I'll take a look at my game."

"We must bury him of course."

"In the morning, for he'll lie safe enough up there on that rock until then."

"I'll take a peep at him."

Then the Lone Star Sharp, as he said he was known in the mines, climbed the rocks to the point where lay the form of the Mexican.

It was doubled up, as though in agony, and lay motionless upon the bare rocks, the wound in his head showing plainly.

"I am not hardened enough yet, Pard St. John, to rob the dead, even though this is a reckless community to dwell in, so we'll let him rest until morning, for night is coming on," and then Lone Star Sharp turned to Gray St. John who had come with him up the rocks.

"Yes, it will be best, for the path to my cabin is a dangerous one for a horse, and we must not delay," and the two started off together.

Gray St. John led the way and Trent Baxter followed on foot, leading his horse.

The trail was a rough one, and there were shot-holes here and there where it needed a sure-footed horse and a nifty one to go over.

At last, just as darkness fell upon the valley, Gray St. John led the way into a little glen from which flowed a small stream.

There, hidden away among rocks and pines was a small cabin, the home of the man who had come to the mines of New Mexico to seek his fortune.

Opening the door with the key which hung to his belt, he said pleasantly:

"You are welcome to my home, Mr. Baxter, though as it is; but I have plenty of food, the spring is but ten feet away, and wood in abundance."

"While you look after your horse, I will build a fire and get supper."

Trent Baxter staked his horse out in the glen, where he could go to the spring when thirsty and had an abundance of grass.

Then he hung up his saddle and bridle and took his seat in front of the door.

Gray St. John had meanwhile built a good fire in a cavity of the rocks outside and its cheerful blaze sent shadows dancing in all directions about the glen.

There was the aroma of boiling coffee, bacon broiling upon the coals, and hoe-cake, while potatoes were roasting in the ashes and several large onions were upon a tin plate upon the rude table, which had been set for two, with tin plates, cup and serviceable knives and forks.

"You will excuse my having no table-cloth and napkins, and lack of silver, I know," said St. John with a smile.

"You are far more comfortable here, pard, than most of the miners, I assure you, while you have a supper there to tempt a parson to break his fast in Lent. My lot has fallen in pleasant places."

"I am glad you are pleased, Mr. Baxter; but think how desolate this cabin, and how doubly desolate that little home away up in Maryland, had you not saved me from that Mexican assassin."

"Providence guided your steps there to save me, Mr. Baxter."

"Without doubt," was the laconic response, and the two miners sat down to a hearty supper together.

CHAPTER VII.

ST. JOHN'S STORY.

AFTER supper fresh logs were thrown upon the fire, which sent forth an acceptable heat and ruddy glow, the pipes were lighted and the two miners sat down for a talk together.

The manner of Trent Baxter was off-hand, and he seemed like a whole-souled, generous fellow, while he readily won over Gray St. John, upon whom he held the claim of having saved his life.

With such a bias in his favor the Lone Star Sharp would surely win his way.

For some little time the two sat in silence, each busy with his thoughts.

Then Baxter said:

"I was regretting, pard, that we did not bury that Mexican who tried to murder you, for they are as slippery as eels."

"But he was surely dead, was he not?"

"*Quien sabe?*"* was the answer with a shrug of the shoulders.

"The truth is a Mexican is like an Indian: never dead until decently buried, or pulled apart by coyotes."

"I have fought them for a long time and know them."

"I know little about them: in fact, I may say, nothing, for I was never among either Mexicans or English before coming here."

"What motive had the Greaser for killing you?"

"None that I am aware of, unless to rob me."

"Then you never saw him before?"

"Never."

"I thought he was perhaps some worthless fellow you had working for you, and had discharged him?"

"No, I have always worked alone."

"You are very new to the mines?"

"Yes, I came here with a hundred dollars in my pocket, and began to prospect for gold, and was so lucky as to make a good find."

"Now I have not been fortunate in my gold

finds! but I have been a kind of rolling stone, you see."

"I am without any one to love me, or to love, and so have drifted about, taking my own part when I have had to do so, which has been quite often, and I am really glad to meet a companionable pard in you, for an ignorant hard lot most of 'em are out here."

"Then why not come here and dig gold with me, Mr. Baxter?"

"Mister Baxter! Now that sounds strange to me, so call me Lone Star, or Baxter, Trent or anything you like, but don't mister me."

"All right, Lone Star, and I say come here and work with me, for I shall change my cabin to-morrow up near my find, and there will be plenty for two."

"No, no, I—"

"I say yes, for, but for you I would be dead now, and those I love would have gotten nothing."

"I have an idea my find is a rich one, for it pans out larger each day, and my first streak of luck was over sixty dollars in raw metal."

"Yes, I mean it; come half with me, Baxter, and we'll grow rich together."

"You are just the noble fellow you look, for your face does not belie you; but I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Yes?"

"I'll come here and work with you, and half I get I'll take, the other going to you."

"Now that is being generous with your lead, so don't say no."

"As you please, but I am willing to go equal shares with you."

"No; but let me ask you if you are aware that you have to register your finds out here?"

"Yes, I discovered that, so as soon as I struck my lead I drew out two maps of the place, homesteaded my allowance in acres and registered in the name of my wife and child, sending them one map and full particulars."

"You were wise, wise indeed, for no one can get it from you now."

"Not a soul can rob them now, for even if I died, they could send here and keep some one at work, you see."

"Yes; but you speak so lovingly of your family, I am interested in them."

"How many children have you?"

"But one."

"A boy, I suppose?"

"No, it is a girl, now in her fifteenth year, and as beautiful as her mother, which is saying a great deal."

"As I like to talk of them, and you have a right to know something of my affairs, I'll tell you of my wife if you wish?"

"Nothing could interest me more, for, somehow, I feel I had a claim upon you."

St. John filled and lighted his pipe afresh, and said in a musing way:

"I was born rich, but left poor by the failure of my father in business, and my mother moved with me, her only child, to her birthplace on the eastern shore of Maryland, a little farm, which was all she had left."

"With a superior education, she taught me thoroughly, each evening at home, while I went to a country school by day, and also looked after the farm, so I was not an idler, as you may know."

"At the school I met a little girl, whom I loved at first sight, but having some dangerous rivals, I despaired of ever winning her love."

"Still I did win it, and my most formidable rival was the son of the biggest landowner in the county, and a prominent judge as well."

"My rival's name was Hugh Hammond, and though he had good traits he had an ungovernable temper, and hated me for winning from him Ethel Enders, for such was her name."

"One evening, when I had returned to the school-house with her, after her history, he came there and by insults, threats and blows forced me into a duel with him before Ethel."

"Could she not prevent it?"

"She was so indignant that she was willing to see me meet him, but asked me to wound, not to kill him, for I was a dead shot, and intended only to break his arm, and so told him."

"Well, Ethel stepped off the distance for us, and gave the word."

"Plucky girl!"

"You may well say so, and when she saw me fire first and miss him, and that I fell at his fire, she ran to the school-house door, against which he stood, and saw no bullet imbedded there."

"Then she told him she would testify that she had seen him with my rifle that afternoon, as she had really done, and that he had drawn out the bullet on purpose to kill me and escape himself."

"In terror he fled, and Ethel sprung upon her horse and rode for the doctor."

"He arrived in time to prevent me from bleeding to death, and I was taken home, where after long months I got well."

"The judge had put a constable upon his son's track, but Hugh had escaped, and the next day he found that the youth had robbed him of all his money and jewelry that had belonged to his mother."

"The blow broke the old gentleman down, for he was financially embarrassed at the time, and he died."

"It killed him, then?"

"Yes, his son proved to be indirectly his murderer, for the judge never rallied."

"Then it was found that his estate was involved, and when all debts were paid there was nothing left."

"In the mean time I got the position as teacher in the country school, as the one who held it was called to a far more lucrative place."

"Then Ethel's mother died, and my mother was left her guardian. So she came to live at our home, and when she was not yet seventeen and I but twenty we were married."

"I do not know why, but from the first year of my marriage misfortune dogged my steps. My home took fire and burned down, and my mother nearly lost her life, the shock making her a confirmed invalid."

"I had no insurance on the house and out-buildings, so it was a total loss; but, Ethel's home had been sold and the money was in a Baltimore bank at interest for her."

"So I began to build with that, and had my house but half done when the bank failed and we lost all that was there."

"My first-born, a bright, splendid boy, died the following year, we supposed from eating some poison berries, as he had a handful when we found him."

"The following year my poor mother passed away, and then I lost the school, for some evil-minded persons spread false reports about me which caused my dismissal."

"Then came a ray of sunshine, in the birth of my little daughter, which I named Ethel, after her mother."

"From that time on it was a hard struggle for life, until I got the gold fever and came out here in search of a fortune, and thank Heaven, I have found it!"

"And from my heart I congratulate you, and wish you all happiness in the future," was the earnest reply of Trent Baxter, who had listened with the deepest interest to the story of Gray St. John's life.

CHAPTER VIII.

A REMARKABLE DISAPPEARANCE.

WRAPPED in their serapes, the two miners slept soundly through the night, and were up bright and early to enjoy a good breakfast.

The Lone Star Sharp had told St. John that he would go by the mine with him, help bury the Mexican and then keep on to the camp where he wished to make a few purchases, after which he would pack up his traps at his own camp and come to live with him.

And, he added:

"It will be best for you to build a cabin on your own land, and we can easily do so together."

At the request of St. John, Lone Star waited for a short while for a letter.

"I must write at once of my narrow escape, Lone Star, and tell how you saved my life and that I will have a good and true friend near me now."

"You will mail the letter in the camps for me?"

Lone Star promised to do so, and, saddling his horse, while St. John wrote the letter, they soon after started for the mine.

Arriving there Lone Star gave a startled cry, and his face turned pale.

"What is it?" quickly asked St. John.

Pointing to the rock the excited answer came:

"He is not there!"

"Then contrary to our expectations coyotes got up there and pulled the body down," suggested St. John.

Dismounting hastily Lone Star ran up the rocks and called out:

"He is not here!"

"Look down in the ravine."

"Nor is he there."

St. John now hastened to the rock.

The only trace of the Mexican was a little pool of blood upon the rocks.

"What can it mean?" almost gasped Lone Star.

* Who knows?

"He was not so badly wounded and so regained consciousness and departed," St. John said.

"Impossible, for I aimed at his heart."

"The bullet must have glanced on a bone, and perhaps he was shamming death, which carries out your idea that a Mexican or an Indian is never dead until buried."

"I shot him squarely through the heart," muttered Lone Star, though St. John did not hear it.

Then he added in the same low tone:

"I meant to do so, at least."

Aloud he said:

"If he is wounded, then he cannot be far away."

"Let us search for him."

And a thorough search was made, but without the result Lone Star hoped for.

"Perhaps some one came along and helped him," said Lone Star.

"No, for no trail leads by here, and you would not have found me had you not gotten lost."

"Then no one comes here, ever?"

"I have never seen any one since I struck the mine two months ago; but if the fellow is wounded why, let him go, for I do not wish his life."

"Ah, my dear pard, he was a Mexican."

"Well, what if he was?"

"You do not know their nature, which is never to forget a wrong or forgive a foe. They are more revengeful than a Comanche, and he'll never rest until he gets even with me."

"I am sorry."

"And you will have to look out, too, for that Mexican knows you have struck it rich and will not give up the game without a hard fight to win."

"If you see him loafing around, just drop on him."

"But I do not know him."

"Never mind, drop any Mexican you see nosing around and you can't go amiss."

"This is a cruel life to lead out here," sadly said St. John.

"It is the country where self-preservation is lived up to as the first law; but I must be off."

"When will you return?"

"Within the week at furthest, perhaps sooner."

Thus, with a grasp of the hand they parted, Miner St. John to continue his work in the mine, and Trent Baxter to again make a thorough search for some trace of the Mexican.

At last he muttered:

"I must give it up; but what a fool I was not to bury him at once, for held down by rocks and dirt even that Juan the Fox could not have extricated himself."

"Strange that I did not put my bullet through his heart, as I aimed to do."

"But he was not too badly wounded to play dead most thoroughly, and now, if he has not died in some place near, he will hold me responsible for this attempt to kill him and his two hundred pesos as well."

"If I don't pay him big money, why then I will be the sufferer."

"Now to see if I can hear of him in the mining-camps," and Trent Baxter rode on his way once more.

It was night when he rode into a large mining-camp scattered through the valley, and the camp-fires were glimmering on mountain-side and vale.

A group of several hundred shanties were near the center of the valley, and this was known as "Devil's Ranch," and it was not by any means an inappropriate name when the dwellers therein were taken into consideration, for a harder lot it was hard to find congregated together even in a State's Prison, a place where many of those who made up that mining-camp should have been, and would have been had they not been fugitives from the iron arm of justice.

Saloons, a couple of one-story taverns, or so called, a few stores, two blacksmith shops and a "Chinese laundry" with some scores of miners' cabins, made up the town.

Of course the saloons were all gambling dens, and the love of play went to such an extent that a miner would gamble for his night's lodging and meals with the landlord, with the keeper of the bar for drinks, and with the storekeepers for what they wished to purchase.

Then, too, the blacksmiths gambled for their horseshoeing and mending utensils and even the trio of Chinese laundrymen had caught the sporting fever and gambled for their wash-bills, and it is needless to say generally came out ahead, for the Heathen Chinese is an expert at cards.

Nearly half the camps were composed of Mexicans and half-breeds, the balance, with a few exceptions being Americans, hailing from Maine to Texas, Florida to Minnesota.

Up to one of the taverns, which was known as the "New Mexico," rode Lone Star, and dismounting at the door he muttered:

"Juan the Fox was not much hurt, I will find him here, and find him I must."

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONE STAR SHARP.

THE man who had said he was known in the mines better by his sobriquet of the Lone Star Sharp, rather than by his own name, seemed familiar with the place he had entered.

His horse was led away by a half-breed Mexican who served as stableman for the tavern, and who seemed very willing to perform the service for Baxter, though it was seldom any one else was so honored, but had to take their own horses to the stables.

"Have you seen Juan the Fox around, Pedro?" asked Lone Star of the stableman.

"No, senor, not since he well nigh met his death last night at the hand of the Revolver Sharp," answered the man.

"And where is that young gentleman, Pedro?"

"Don't know, senor, for he has not been here to-day."

"Any of my comrades here to-night?"

"Yes, senor, Don Cavalho and Miner Corallez are at the card table."

With this Lone Star entered the tavern and walked up to the cuddy known as the office.

"I will stop with you to-night, Du Val," he said to the landlord, who responded:

"Glad to have you, senor; but you cannot have your favorite room."

"And why not?" was the angry question.

"A lady has it, senor."

"What, a lady in the Devil's Ranch?"

"Yes, senor. She came in on the Santa Fe coach."

"What does she want here?"

"She has just that look in her face, senor, which said: 'Don't ask me,' so I didn't."

"Who is she, Du Val?"

"She signed as Senora Dolores, senor."

"Some Mexican woman on the trail of a lover who has deserted her, I'll warrant, for they are so terribly revengeful."

"You have had experience with them, then, Senor Lone Star?"

"Yes, I once lived in Mexico; but I want supper, and the best bed in your old Owl's Roost, Du Val."

"I'll give you the third best, senor, for the second best is engaged."

"To another woman?"

"No, senor; to the Revolver Sharp."

"Ah! I would like to play that youngster a game, just to take him down a peg or two, for he is getting terribly forward for a boy."

"Don't quarrel with him, senor, dangerous man though you be, unless you have the drop on him."

"Oh, he's a terror to r'ile, I admit; but I'd like a game of cards with him for all that," and Lone Star entered the dining-room, where he was quickly given his supper, the best the place had, too, for the servants knew how liberal were his fees.

As he passed through the office again, Landlord Du Val hailed him with:

"I say, senor, the Revolver Sharp is here, and I told him you wanted a game with him, and he said he would be only too happy to oblige you; but I have made also a prior engagement for you to play."

"Indeed? And who is to be my partner?"

"The lady."

"What, Senora Dolores?"

"Yes."

"Is she pretty?"

"I do not know, senor, for I have not seen her face."

"Why not?"

"She is heavily veiled, senor."

"The mischief, you say! And am I expected to play with a masked woman?"

"Veiled, I said, senor."

"It is the same thing, for who can penetrate a woman's veil? She is doubtless some old gambling scarecrow who may play aces upon me at every big bet."

"I think she is young, senor, and pretty."

"And you told her I would play with her?"

"I did, senor."

"You are a little previous, Du Val."

"Well, senor, she said she never played for less than a hundred dollars, and I suggested Don Cavalho and Miner Corallez as large play-

ers; but she said she had heard of you and wished to match her luck against yours."

"Where is she?"

"Awaiting you in the saloon."

"All right."

"I'll introduce you," and the landlord of the New Mexico walked into the gambling saloon with his guest.

There sat the woman, dressed in a black riding-habit, and wearing a sombrero with a heavy black plume pinned in with a small dagger pin of rare workmanship, the hilt being set with rubies.

A heavy veil fell from over her head, worn under the hat, and reaching to her waist completely enveloped her, revealing not even the color of her hair.

Gauntlet gloves concealed her hands, and it could not be told whether she was pale-face, Indian or negro.

"Senora Dolores, permit me to present to you a gentleman well known in these parts as the Lone Star Sharp," said Landlord Du Val.

Baxter bowed low, and the woman bent an earnest gaze upon him it seemed, while she slightly bent her head in acknowledgment of the introduction, and said:

"I am glad to meet Senor Lone Star, and thank him for giving me an evening of pleasure, for he has come to play with me, has he not?"

"Yes, senora, I am at your service; but I never played with a lady, before, for gold."

"Then let me tell you I seek no mercy, and shall give none. Sit down, senor. We will play here, if you please."

For the first time in his life those about the Lone Star thought he seemed a trifle nervous; but to sit opposite that veiled woman, to feel her eyes were upon him, and not to know whether she was white, black or red-skin was enough to shake a nerve as strong as that of the Lone Star Sharp.

The landlord brought a fresh pack of cards and a game was begun, while the strange sight of a woman in Devil's Ranch, and playing cards for a large stake with the most successful gambler and desperate man in the mines, drew a large crowd about the table.

CHAPTER X.

SENORA DOLORES.

IN spite of his nervousness, playing with one whose face he could not see, the Lone Star Sharp was lucky and won straight along, game after game, against the Senora Dolores.

If she felt his success and her ill-fortune, the fact was hidden beneath her veil, and her hands were as steady as ever.

"I hate to win from a woman—I beg pardon, a lady," said the Lone Star Sharp after he had won steadily a dozen games.

"You need not feel troubled on my account," senor, for I play to win, and if I lose accept the situation.

"That is the twelfth game you have won, I believe?" remarked the veiled woman calmly.

"Yes, I have just twelve hundred dollars of your money, senora."

"Well, somehow I have faith in Number Thirteen, a number which most persons believe to be unlucky, and for the next game I have a proposition to make to you, senor?"

"What is it, senora?"

"You have twelve hundred dollars of my money?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will match the sum—here it is," and she placed that amount upon the table.

"Well?"

"Now I will match my money and a silent bet against you on the next game."

"I do not exactly understand, senora."

"If you win you take my twelve hundred here in addition to what you have."

"Yes."

"If you lose I shall claim my silent bet."

"And what is that?"

"It must be unknown until I win."

"If you lose?"

"It remains unknown."

"But if you win you claim it?"

"Yes."

"And the money I have won from you?"

"Of course."

"I hardly think this is fair, as I remain in ignorance."

"Then I will equalize it the more."

"Yes, and how?"

"I will put up twelve hundred dollars more for you to win."

"And you?"

"Will, if I win, claim my silent bet only."

"That is better, but I don't like this silent bet, as you call it?"

"You have won twelve straight games, so you are in luck; I am having a streak of ill-luck."

"True."

"Yet I stake twenty-four hundred dollars on the winning of a game."

"And you lose it if I win?"

"Yes, besides you keep the twelve hundred you have won."

"I understand; but your silent bet?"

"I will make known if I win."

"I fear some catch in it."

"If you are afraid to play, Senor Lone Star, then back squarely down, don't hedge."

The man's face flushed, for he heard the laugh the woman's words caused.

"I fear no man living," he said, hotly.

"Nor woman?" was the quiet query.

He started slightly at this and returned:

"I fear nothing—Heaven, Hades, Humanity or the Brute Creation," was the almost savage rejoinder.

"Then do you play, or back down from a woman?"

"I play."

"With conditions I named?"

"Yes, though it is unfair not to name your stake."

"How so?"

"It may be worthless."

"I'll pledge you it is worth more to you than the sum I have named."

"Agreed."

"You pledge yourself to pay the bet?"

"I do."

"Here, before witnesses, you pledge yourself to pay the stake I demand?"

"Yes, what more do you want?"

"Your oath."

"I'll not give it."

"That shows you meant to back down from your word."

"No, but why should I take my oath on it?"

"Because a woman, whose money you have won—a woman who stakes double as much more on one game asks it."

"Well, I'll give you my word."

"A man who would give his word, yet fear to give his oath is a coward," was the cool reply of the woman.

"What! you dare take advantage of your sex to insult me?"

"I'll humbly ask pardon if you prove my assertion untrue regarding yourself by taking your oath that I may collect my bet if I win."

"Agreed! I'll swear that you may do so."

"Then my words did not apply to you and I retract them, humbly asking your pardon."

"Granted! but now, let us play more and talk less, senora," and the gambler seemed really moved, for he knew that half a hundred men had their eyes upon him.

Somehow he began to feel that the one who faced him was not a woman after all, but a man.

This brightened him up and gave him courage, for no man did he fear, or he felt that he did not, which was just as good.

"I am ready for the game, senora," he said in his usual manner.

"And so am I, senor," and the money was counted out and placed upon the table.

The strange game had interested all in it, and especially after the conversation between the two players.

The silent bet of the woman created a suppressed excitement and now all stood breathlessly watching the game and awaiting the result.

What the stake could be the woman would claim no one could guess, and they could not but admire the coolness of the Lone Star Sharp when having to face so mysterious an ordeal, for now he was perfectly calm, a smile upon his face, and his hands were steady as a rock.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SILENT BET.

THE Lone Star Sharp was not the only one who felt the mysterious influence of the veiled woman.

They all seemed to feel it, and Landlord Du Val was asked several times about her.

"I never saw her face," he whispered. "She was heavily veiled when she came in the coach, and the driver had not once seen her face," he responded.

"She may not be a woman, after all."

"Then her feet belie her, for she's got pretty little ones and no mistake; and, just look at her tiny hands," replied Du Val, who always had a weakness for small hands and feet, being very fond of his own.

"I guess she's a woman if her gloved hands are any indication," responded the miner who had been questioning the landlord.

The game had now become so interesting that all watched it closely and even failed to notice a new-comer who made his way near the table, standing just behind the veiled woman, for several who had observed him near them involuntarily made room for him.

He was a mere youth, not over eighteen, certainly, and was dressed in Mexican garb, though he did not appear to be of that race, his hair being brown and waving, for it fell upon his broad shoulders, and having eyes of such dark blue as to almost appear black.

His form was tall, elegant, and his every movement was graceful, while he had the appearance of being an athlete.

His Mexican costume was of the finest velvet; the buttons were of gold, as were also the massive spurs, and the heavy buckle of his belt.

His shirt was of white silk, with broad collar, and spotless in its cleanliness.

The most striking thing about his attire was his sombrero, which had an exceedingly large brim, and was of a bright scarlet hue, encircled by a cord of gold.

The left side of the sombrero was looped up with a pin representing a miniature gold revolver, and besides an embroidered belt about his waist he wore a scarlet sash of silk.

In his belt were a pair of gold-mounted revolvers of large calibre, and a bowie with a carved hilt and long blades. A pair of buckskin gauntlet gloves had been stuck in his sash in a *neglige* manner.

Altogether the youth was a very remarkable looking personage, for his face was almost effeminate in its beauty, which, however, was also strongly stamped with manliness of the highest order.

He nodded pleasantly to several who gave way for him, and took his stand behind the veiled woman.

The game was being played very slowly, every play being dwelt upon most cautiously, until the suspense to the lookers-on became intense. But how much more intense to the two players.

The woman was calm, silent, for she uttered no word, but her hand was hardly as steady as in the previous games she had played—a fact that all noticed.

As for the Lone Star Sharp he seemed to have come to the conclusion that his opponent was a man in female garb and his courage arose accordingly.

His hands were steady as he held the cards. Yet he played with the greatest caution it could be seen by all.

On the last round the two held their hands back, neither seeming anxious to show them.

At length the woman said in a low voice:

"I hold four aces—can you beat that hand?"

With a muttered imprecation the Lone Star Sharp threw down his hand, *beaten*.

He had held cards that would have beaten any other hand than four aces.

"You have won," he said, in a mock-cheerful tone.

"Yes, I told you that thirteen was my lucky number, when most persons find it unlucky for them—you, for instance."

"Well, now let us understand this bet."

"Yes."

"I keep what I have won?"

"You do."

"But lose the twenty-four hundred?"

"You do not, for I risked that against my silent bet, so you take the twenty-four hundred dollars. There it is," and she shoved the money toward him.

He did not pocket it, simply putting it with the other he had won, as though now, emboldened by the money, he was willing to go on.

"But, as you lost the game, you have to pay me my bet."

"What is it?"

"My silent bet."

"I asked you what it was."

"I have your pledge that I can collect it."

"Yes."

"I have your oath that when I demand it you will pay it."

"Well, what more do you want, senora?" he asked, in an excited tone.

"The bet!" was the answer, in a voice strangely deep and stern for a woman.

"I know not what it is."

"You shall know what it is, and in spite of your nerve, Lone Star Sharp, your face will whiten when I claim my stake."

The manner of the veiled woman caused all to feel uneasy.

What did she mean to claim as her stake which she had won?

As for Lone Star, he became again uneasy, for there was that in sitting before this Sphinx in Black, as she seemed, that was enough to shake the strongest nerves.

What she meant to claim now he could not think.

He had glanced at her hands now for the first time, and the thought that his adversary might be a man faded from him, for no man could have such tiny gloved hands as those; so he said almost excitedly:

"I ask you again, what am I to pay you, senora?"

"Your life is the stake you have to pay me!" cried the veiled woman, and, quick as a flash, she had covered the Lone Star Sharp with a revolver.

CHAPTER XII.

THE REVOLVER SHARP CHIPS IN.

THE revolver held in the hand of the veiled woman covered the breast of the Lone Star Sharp. The most interested observer could not deny that.

That she meant to fire, too, was evident, for, after her startling words to him, of what her silent bet had been, she said:

"I intend to kill you, Huascar Del Sol, and the second before I touch the trigger, I shall tell you by whose hand you die."

The Lone Star Sharp was now like a man turned to marble, for there was a tone in the voice of the woman which he seemed to recognize, as a groan came from between his teeth.

He looked like a man who had seen a ghost and knew that it was no fancy of an excited brain.

To save his life he could not move, and he gazed upon the veiled face before him as helpless as a corpse.

Only a few seconds did the woman pause, as though to give full force to her words; then the lips parted once more:

"I claim my bet, Huascar Del Sol, and you die by the hand of—"

The revolver was knocked suddenly upward, and the bullet was buried in the roof of the saloon, for she had touched the trigger.

Like one maddened with rage she sprang from her seat and rushed upon the one who had foiled her, to be confronted by the smiling face of the youth in Mexican attire.

"You saved him?" rung out in a voice full of fury.

"Yes, lady, I took that liberty," was the complacent reply.

"Then you shall die!" and her revolver again was leveled, but never fired, for it was wrenched from her hand by a quick movement, and the youth said calmly:

"This is not my day for dying, lady, so sit down and let us talk the matter over quietly."

"Who are you?" the baffled woman cried as she dropped back into her chair.

"They call me here the Gold Revolver Sharp, some often shortening it to the Revolver Sharp, lady," was the youth's reply.

"Are you ashamed of your real name?"

"Oh, no, lady; I am on the roll at Fort Blanco as Redfern, the Scout."

"Well, then, Redfern, the Scout, Gold Revolver Sharp, or by whatever other name you care to be known, pray tell me by what authority you have interfered in this affair," and the woman's voice showed her fierce earnestness.

"In the first place, my dear lady, I interfered because I did not wish you to kill a man who could not, or would not, protect himself by firing on a woman."

"Then he is your friend?"

"On the contrary, the Lone Star Sharp has seemed to feel in a most unfriendly way toward me."

"Then why save his life?"

"Why take it?"

"I have my reasons, sir."

"And I mine for saving him."

"Will you not give me a reason?"

"Certainly. He has an engagement to play cards with me, after his game with you was over."

"And your interference I resent, as you disarmed me."

"I did so as you seemed to desire my life, too; but let me ask you not to attempt to repeat your act either upon the Lone Star Sharp or myself."

Much in the tone and manner in which this was said impressed the woman. The youth was looking squarely upon the veiled face, and some-

how his eyes seemed to *control* her, for she responded:

"I shall not offend Redfern the Scout again—at least *not now*."

"You are wise, lady, and let me be generous, for I will play a game with Senor Lone Star, letting the forfeit be whether he shall lose his life to you, or you yield your right to kill him. What do you say?"

"This is a most astounding proposition, senor."

"Hardly more so than your demand for him to play you for a forfeit you would not name until you won the game, lady."

"I'll agree to it, senor," she said, quickly, as though moved by some sudden impulse.

The youth smiled in his pleasant way, and said:

"Now to see if I can raise the stakes."

Then he turned to the Lone Star Sharp and asked:

"Senor, will you stake your life upon the turn of a card in a game which I shall play with this lady, who shall yield whatever claim she may have to kill you if she loses?"

Lone Star had sat in silence while all the foregoing conversation had been going on.

His eyes had seemed to be striving to pierce that black veil and discover who it was that had so determinedly sought his life.

That he owed it to the Revolver Sharp that he was not a dead man, he well knew.

He had never liked the Boy Scout, for he was hardly more than a boy in years, and now he was placed under the deepest obligation to him that one man could be to another.

He noted, too, how quickly he had disarmed the woman, when she had turned her revolver in her rage upon him.

Who he was, more than that he was known as a young scout, guide and hunter he did not know.

Often he was seen in Devil's Ranch, and his remarkable aim and the fact that he carried gold-mounted weapons had gained for him the name of the Gold Revolver Sharp.

Now came the cool query from the youth for him to put his life up as a stake in a game he should play with the woman.

With a certain recklessness born of the situation, and withal a perfect faith now in the youth, he answered:

"I accept the alternative, Senor Redfern, and stake my life on any game you play, if that woman takes oath to attempt no underhand way to kill me."

"She will certainly give her oath, as you did, to keep her pledge," the Revolver Sharp assured, and he turned a questioning look upon the woman who answered firmly:

"Yes, I will so pledge myself by oath, for the time of *one year* at least."

"Very well; that will do," acquiesced the Lone Star Sharp quietly, and all could not but admire his nerve.

"If I win though?" suddenly asked the woman.

"Why, kill him, of course," was the free and easy answer of the youth, and it brought a general burst of laughter, even Lone Star smiling while he muttered:

"There is something back of all this that I don't fathom."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE REVOLVER SHARP AS A CARD SHARP.

THERE was a remarkable interest felt in Devil's Ranch by all its denizens for the young Revolver Sharp.

What brought him there no one knew, and yet he came with marked regularity once each month.

More than that he was known at the fort as an extraordinary scout and guide, no one knew aught regarding him.

His name was Redfern, he said, and yet he dressed as a Mexican and spoke the language without the slightest accent. Yet he did the same as regarded the English language.

He seemed fond of playing cards, always had plenty of money, and was noted for his luck, be the game of chance what it might.

If he won money from a poor man he returned it with the remark that he played for the sport of it.

A dozen or more personal encounters he had had, and yet he never sought one—even seemed to avoid trouble; but, when trouble came they found him a most dangerous foe.

He fired with amazing quickness, and never missed his mark.

Only two nights before he had taken the part of a miner who was being cheated at cards by

Juan the Fox and several others. The Mexicans had drawn and were preparing to fire when the revolver of the young scout was thrown forward and the bullet cut along the top of Juan's head; whereat, down dropped the Mexican, and he had the good sense to "play possum" until the Revolver Sharp left the saloon, when of course he departed with the threat to one day kill Redfern.

The Lone Star Sharp had seen the affair and the next day, as has been seen, hunted Juan up and made an engagement with him which was to have proven fatal to him, for so the Texan intended it.

Such was the youth who now held the life of the Lone Star Sharp in his hands, to win it, or lose it on the turn of a card.

"Shall we make it three games, sir, the last two to win?" asked the woman, and Lone Star smiled.

It seemed to him an evidence of doubt on her part of winning, for she had sought no such terms with him.

"As you please, lady, one game, best two in three, or three in five," was the pleasant response of the youth.

"Then have it best three in five," she requested, eagerly, and again Lone Star smiled, while he felt still more confidence in the young scout.

The Gold Revolver Sharp bowed his acquiescence and Landlord Du Val handed over a new pack of cards.

The Lone Star Sharp was given a place at the table and took it calmly, though naturally his face was very pale.

The woman dealt and her gloved hands betrayed more nervousness, which, however, she quickly controlled.

The first game was played by the woman with extreme caution, while the Revolver Sharp seemed perfectly indifferent.

"You are a good player, lady, and you have won," he said, with a smile.

At once the woman gained more confidence, and the game was played in silence.

"Again you win, lady," remarked the youth, and she gave a little gasp of joy, while Lone Star became the hue of a corpse, though he kept his nerve.

Another game won by the woman and his life was in her hands!

And more, she had won two games already, and had three more chances to get the one more needed.

The excitement about the table was intense, though suppressed, and all eyes turned upon the Gold Revolver Sharp.

His face had not lost its smile, and he seemed as indifferent as ever.

But then it was not his life that was at stake, thought Lone Star.

"He saved me, and now I am to be sacrificed," he muttered, while he added:

"But they forgot my arms, and that woman shall never kill me."

The third game was begun amid the greatest of interest.

The woman seemed confident, and played accordingly.

But at last the turning-point came, and the young scout said in his cheery way:

"I hold four aces, lady."

"Can you beat it?"

All heard the low imprecation that came from beneath the veil; but she nerved herself quickly, for the battle was not yet wholly lost to her; there were two more chances for her to win one game in.

So the fourth game was played, and in the same light way, at the end came the words:

"Four aces to beat, lady."

Again she had lost, and once more there was intense feeling, while the fifth and last game was being played.

At last the youth said:

"I haven't the four aces this time, lady, but I have confidence enough in my hand to wager one thousand dollars that I win. Don you take my bet, lady?"

"Yes," was the sharp reply, that made the Lone Star Sharp fairly start.

"Gentlemen, I am so fond of a wager that I would like to make a few outside bets—one hundred, two, three, four, five; yes, a thousand that I win, and I'll tell you frankly I have not four aces."

"I'll go you a couple, Redfern," said Landlord Du Val, and the money was put up.

"And I a hundred," called out a miner, and it was taken.

"I'll bet you a thousand, if you'll take it," cried the speaker, Don Cavalbo.

Redfern bowed assent, and Miner Corallez asked to put up five hundred, and it was taken.

"Any more?" demanded the Revolver Sharp with a smile.

There were no takers and he turned to Lone Star and asked:

"How will you wager, senor?"

"But one way, for one of *your nerve* can't lose," was the quick response.

"Will you wager a thousand on that, senor?" asked the woman quickly.

"Yes, senor," was the Lone Star Sharp's equally quick response, and the money was put up.

"Now, lady," and the Revolver Sharp's face did not lose its smile, or his voice its cheery tone, "what have you to beat a pair of aces and a pair of Jacks?"

The bitter imprecation from beneath the veil showed that the woman had lost, and Redfern said:

"Now, Senor Lone Star, I am ready for a game with *you*, if so you wish."

"I am ready, Redfern," and Lone Star glanced toward the woman, who slowly arose and left the saloon.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

FOR some reason the Revolver Sharp did not care to play many games, great as was the interest manifested in seeing these two engaged in a game of cards where the stakes ran high.

The youth played in the light-hearted way natural to him, and though constantly losing, the smile never left his face, nor did his manner change.

"He wears that same smile when he's got his death aim on a man," said a miner.

"Yes, I seen him drop Reuben Daws one night and never git up from the table, and then we found out Reube was in a plot ter fix him which he tumbled to jist in time and pulled trigger."

"Then he calls out to ther Don, who he was playin' with:

"'I calls yer, Don,' jist as sweet as though nothin' hed happened: oh! he's a dandy—that boy is."

"Are he a boy?"

"Waal, he isn't old enough ter vote fer several years yit."

"He are older than he looks, pard, and sometimes it do strike me he is a woman, for he's as pretty as one."

Thus the conversation about the young scout went on, until suddenly his luck changed and he began to win.

Steadily the games were won until he had gotten even, when he said:

"Quits for to-night, senor, but another time we'll play again."

"Yes, with pleasure; but you'll join in a bottle of wine?"

"If I drank, yes, but I do not, thank you. Good-night."

"Let me say how deeply I appreciate your service to me to-night."

"Don't speak of it, Senor Lone Star, for I simply saved a life when I saw one in danger," and with a wave of the hand, he left the saloon.

Soon after he was in his room, preparing to retire when a gentle tap came upon his door.

He opened it to find there the veiled lady gambler.

"Ah! I was wishing to see you, and intending to do so to-morrow. Will you come in, lady?"

"No, for one can overhear what is said here, but in my room it is safe."

"I will come," and he followed the woman, who still was heavily veiled.

"Sit down," she said, as he entered what Landlord Du Val called his "Star Chamber," for it was the best in his tavern by far.

"Are you going to tell me why you sought the life of the Lone Star Sharp to-night?" asked the youth, in his pleasant way.

"Are you going to tell me why you saved his life?"

"I'll exchange secret for secret with you, lady."

"Then tell me why you did not let me kill him?"

"You are his enemy?"

"Yes, the worst foe he has on earth."

"Then I will tell you that I saved him from no feeling of friendship."

"Why, then?"

"Because, by his death, I would lose an opportunity to carry out certain plans I have on hand."

"You wish to use him, then?"

"After a manner, yes, but not to let him think I am doing so."

"Ah! I thought I read as much in your face to-night; but do you know him?"

"Yes, as the Lone Star Sharp, a Texan, who is a most daring and successful gambler, a dead shot and dreaded greatly in the mines, though he is also liked."

"What else do you know about him?"

"I am sure of nothing else, but I am suspicious of him and am trying to verify my suspicions. You see I talk frankly to you."

"As you may do."

"Now tell me why you hate him?"

"First let me know if you verify your suspicions, is he to be punished?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By the hangman, I guess," was the laughing reply.

"Ah! I see that you are in earnest, and so I will not tell you *why* I hate him! but, I will leave him in your hands for one year, as you have my word that I will—my oath, in fact. But if, then, you have not tracked him down I shall act and I will come to you and tell you all I know."

"Why not now, lady?"

"You forced me to give an oath to-night, for one year, not to take his life. If I told you now, I would be taking his life, thus breaking my oath which I deem sacred, as you would hang him within ten days."

"I see how my own request has headed me off; but, I suppose I must wait, unless I find out in my own way all I would know."

"I see no other alternative; but, now tell me who you are?"

"I told you to-night, lady, that my name is Redfern, and I am a scout, guide, Indian-fighter and wanderer."

"Are you a Mexican, or an American?" and the woman eagerly asked the question.

"I am a Texan."

"Were you ever in Mexico?"

"Often!"

"Where are your parents?"

"They were massacred by Comanches, five years ago in Texas."

"Have you brothers and sisters?"

"None."

"You are alone in the world?"

"All alone, lady."

"Some day, Señor Redfern, I will see you again: now good-by."

He arose and grasped the hand that she held out and left the room.

"What a mysterious woman! I must know more about her, and when she leaves here I will follow her trail," he decided.

But in the morning, when he asked after breakfast for the veiled woman, Landlord Du Val informed him that she had taken the stage back to Santa Fe, and had been four hours gone.

He at once called for his horse, a splendid bay, equipped with a Mexican saddle and bridle, and set off in a sweeping gallop to overtake the Santa Fe coach.

CHAPTER XV.

A LOST TRAIL.

THE horse which the young Revolver Sharp bestrode seemed to be tireless, for he kept up the long swinging lope he had started in from Devil's Ranch until many a mile had been left behind him.

At length he came into a mountain pass where he knew he must soon overhaul the coach, and he urged his horse to a swifter pace to suddenly come upon a scene that was startling, to say the least of it.

Without an instant's hesitation however, he turned in his saddle and called out:

"Now we have them, boys!"

Then he spurred forward, a revolver in each hand.

The scene that he had come upon was one that many a brave man would not have rushed so boldly upon, for the coach was there in the road, and about it was grouped half-a-dozen or more road-agents.

But the bold cry of the youth, and his daring charge upon them, scattered the outlaws, but not until one of their number and a horse had fallen under his deadly aim.

Into the recess of the mountains dashed the outlaws in alarm, while alongside of the coach rode the young Revolver Sharp, crying out:

"Drive for your life, Mexican Joe for I am alone!"

Mexican Joe, the driver, needed no second bidding, and away his horses went at full speed, while the youth led the way.

The coach swayed wildly, the passengers were in dire alarm, but Mexican Joe was a superb hand with the reins, and now had a chance to save a box of treasure which, a minute later, would have been in the hands of the outlaws.

Coming to a long stretch, where the road was good but down grade for a couple of miles, he sent the team fairly flying along, the Revolver Sharp keeping ahead and leading the way.

At last, after several miles run, Mexican Joe drew his panting horses down to a slow trot and called out:

"You saved the old coach that time, Revolver Sharp, and a box of gold-dust as well, with more from the passengers, for they had us foul."

"I am glad I happened along as I did, Joe; but how many passengers have you?"

"Six, now that strange lady left me."

"What, the veiled lady?"

"The same, sir, whom you played keards with last night at Du Val's."

"Did she not come with you from Devil's Ranch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then where is she now?"

"She left the coach ten miles back at Valley Spring."

"How did she leave it, for there is not a ranch near there?"

"I saw a party of horsemen there, and thought the road-agents had us, especially as I noticed that they all wore masks."

"Wore masks?"

"Fact, Redfern, they were all dressed in buckskin and wore masks."

"How many men did you see?"

"Twenty."

"This is strange"

"They waited until the coach came up, and I hung back at seeing them, until the lady called out that they were friends of hers."

"When I drew rein she got out and mounted a led horse with a side-saddle on him, and bidding me good-morning, rode away."

"I saw a trail leading southward from Valley Spring, but being in a hurry to overtake the coach I came on."

"That's the way she went, pard."

"With the horsemen?"

"All of 'em."

"Then it seemed as though they had met her there by appointment?"

"That's just what I am sure they did."

"And they were masked?"

"Every one of them."

"Had they nothing to say?"

"Not a word, and when one helped her to mount, he rode off ahead, she followed, and the others came along behind two and two."

"They were not soldiers?"

"I'm sure they were not."

"Nor rangers?"

"No."

"Mexicans?"

"I couldn't tell, for I did not see their faces, pard."

"I cannot understand it, Joe."

"Nor me, pard."

"She seemed willing to go?"

"You bet she did, and it's lucky she did."

"Why?"

"Them road-agents asked for her, first thing."

"The outlaws did?"

"They sure did, Pard Gold Revolver."

"What did they say?"

"They were mad as hornets that they did not find her, for they seemed to have expected a good thing by her capture."

"You told them how she had left you?"

"Yes, and it was talking about her that put their robbing us off until you came up; but, Lord! how game you did that, pard."

"I say, Joe, you took the lady to Devil's Ranch?"

"I did."

"Where did she join you?"

"She came on from Santa Fe."

"You are sure?"

"She sure did."

"Well, Joe, I hope you will have no more trouble, and I'll report at the fort that road-agents are on the trail," and unheeding the thanks of the passengers at his saving them from robbery, the Revolver Sharp rode back upon the trail he had come, unmindful of Mexican Joe's warning to look out for the disappointed road-agents.

Back to Valley Spring went the young scout, and then he took the trail of the horsemen who had carried off the veiled woman; but, after a few miles he lost the trail in the mountains, and, good scout and trailer that he was, he was forced to give it up and return to Devil's Ranch.

It was night when he arrived, and learned that Lone Star had also departed, going, no one knew where.

CHAPTER XVI.

PARDS.

FOR a man who took the chances that he did, almost every day of his life, Trent Baxter, the Lone Star Sharp, was very much impressed by his narrow escape from death at the hands of the veiled woman.

Perhaps it was the fact that he owed his rescue to the Gold Revolver Sharp, a youth whom he had cordially hated as well as stood in some dread of.

He knew that though young Redfern was fond of sport, and card-playing, and roamed about the mines in a seemingly aimless sort of way, he yet had a legitimate calling in being a Government scout.

He, Baxter, also was supposed to be a miner, but he possessed several old worn-out mines which he had won by gambling and only spent a day in them now and then to claim to be a miner instead of a professional card-player.

So finding that the young scout had left the camps, Trent Baxter also took his departure, after having put a Mexican spy, he kept in his employ, on the lookout for Juan the Fox, who he was now sure had escaped the death he had intended for him.

He told the Mexican where to find him, in case he saw or heard of Juan the Fox, and having discovered that the veiled woman had departed by the Santa Fe coach, and the Revolver Sharp left on horseback, he mounted his own horse and rode away.

But he did not go as he came, for he took back with him a handsome horse, saddle and bridle, and packed upon the animal a goodly supply of provisions, ammunition and other things to make the cabin of Gray St. John more comfortable.

It was late in the evening when he rode up to the cabin, and found St. John resting after his day of labor.

He was greeted pleasantly, and then the sport said:

"I took the liberty of making you a present, Pard St. John, for you had no horse, and now we can take rides about the country together."

"It was, indeed, most generous of you, Baxter, and I had intended getting me a horse the very next time I went to the camps for provisions."

"A fine animal it is, too, and I thank you most heartily, only I wish you would let me pay you for him."

"No, indeed, for have I not, without paying out a dollar or by any exertion of mine, been given by you a handsome interest in your mine? No, I am your debtor, I assure you; but see, I got these new Apache blankets, and a few other things, along with a lot of provisions, so we won't live slow, will we?"

"By no means; we will live like princes, and I'll tell you that I spent to-day clearing out a space for our new cabin, and we can now have a comfortable home there."

"And it will be better near the mine."

Supper was soon over, and the two men began to pack up for removing the next day.

At dawn they were up and at work, and the traps were all carried over to the new place.

The spot chosen was upon a shelf of rock overhung by a high cliff.

There was a generous spring of water tumbling over the rocks there, and the cabin would be sheltered and command a view of the mine and the approach up the canyon.

There at its head the canyon widened into a bowl-like valley, several acres in size, and with steep, overhanging bluffs upon all sides, heavily wooded here and there.

Below, the canyon was not sixty feet in width, and this could be fenced off so as to give the horses freedom, while the grass was in the greatest abundance, and of the juiciest kind.

The traps from the old cabin were all brought over first, and then the fence was built across the canyon and the horses turned loose, after which the two men so strangely met sat down to breakfast.

The door and window-shutters of the old cabin were made use of for the new, and when night came the walls were ready for the roof.

Two rooms had been built, with a shed in the rear for the horses in bad weather.

The next day the new cabin was finished, and found to be a snug house indeed, with one room for sleeping in, the other as kitchen, eating and sitting-room combined.

"Now we are most comfortable," said Gray St. John, as a cheerful fire burned upon the hearth, and he glanced admiringly around his little quarters.

"Yes, we have really a comfortable home here in the wilderness, Pard St. John, and a

year's work will make us rich men," was the answer.

"Yes; and when we are dwelling in luxury once more in civilization, we can look back upon our life here with real pleasure.

"I think, too, we can help our fare along a little, for we can take turn about each day hunting and fishing for a couple of hours, and not work so hard, for the mine is rich enough to give us each a fortune, I am sure."

"It certainly appears so; but did you find no further trace of that Mexican who tried to kill you?"

"None, though I went all over the ground again after you left."

"I cannot understand it."

"I can only by the belief that your bullet missed him."

The Lone Star Sharp smiled and said:

"Oh, no, I never missed him, though my bullet may have glanced on a bone and slightly wounded him."

"And he pretended to be dead?"

"Yes, and escaped soon as we left; but if you happen to see him again, just shoot him at sight, for these fellows fawn like a dog, and are as treacherous as a snake.

"Now, he had been watching you for some time, I guess, to get a chance to kill you, rob your mine, and I am glad to be here so as to be a protection to you, for nothing must happen to you, my dear St. John, for what would your loved wife and little daughter do without you?"

"God knows; but you mailed my letter to my wife?"

"Oh, yes."

"I must write my daughter to-morrow night, for I take turn about, and Sundays I always ride to the camps after provisions and to mail my letters, for I never work on that day."

"Nor I! but have you the likeness of your loved ones with you, St. John?"

"Yes, I will show them to you," and he took from his traps two photographs.

One was of a beautiful woman, who was still in her thirties, and the other was of a young and lovely girl of fourteen, a striking resemblance existing between mother and daughter.

"These are my two earthly idols, Baxter, and you can see for yourself what they are," he said, proudly.

The Lone Star Sharp gazed at each picture long and earnestly.

He seemed almost fascinated by them, and at last with a deep sigh and a voice that quivered he said:

"You are indeed blessed, St. John, with such a wife, such a daughter."

Without another word he arose and sought his blankets, the spell of the likeness seeming to still rest upon him.

CHAPTER XVII.

JUAN THE FOX.

JUAN THE FOX, as the Mexican was known, whom the Lone Star Sharp had hired to aid him in his mysterious manner of making the acquaintance of Gray St. John, had done his part of the affair as agreed upon.

Juan was a native of New Mexico, hence a Mexican who had become a citizen of the United States.

This honor Juan did not wholly appreciate I fear, for he stuck to many of his old habits.

The worst one of these perhaps was killing, for had Juan been bargained with by the Lone Star Sharp to kill Gray St. John, instead of to pretend to do so, it would have been all the same to him, for he would have done so for the same sum he had been promised for the mock attempt.

He did not know Miner St. John nor where he was located; but Juan luckily did not suspect that he had "struck it rich," and was then all alone or he would have gone his own way about getting rich himself.

There was a tradition in Juan's mind that his forefathers had once possessed riches, and this degenerate son of the ancient Mexicans was desirous of emulating their example.

How he got wealth made no difference to him so that he got it.

So Juan had bargained with the Lone Star Sharp for two hundred dollars to have a little mock tragedy, in which he was to be the actor.

He was to be caught aiming at St. John, and the Sharp from Texas was to fire over his head and rushing forward was to play the life-preserver of the miner.

Without his game, the sharp might not be able to prove the great service rendered, so that the Mexican was to "play 'possum."

In other words, he was to use the wound

received the night before at the hands of the Revolver Sharp for this occasion.

He was to make believe that the bullet of the Sharp from Texas had cut its way there, instantly killing him.

And he was to rest all in a heap, so silent, so motionless as to make the miner believe he was dead.

Of course the sharp would find some way to protect him from too close observation, and take upon himself the carrying of the body to camp, under pretense there was a reward on his head, and then he, Juan, the Fox, could escape and still be considered dead by the miner.

But, very much alive indeed, it was Juan's intention to see just what game the sharp from the Lone Star State intended to play.

If there was money in it, Juan wished his share.

It was true that the sharp held strong claims upon the Mexican, or what most persons would have considered strong claims, for he had saved the Fox from dancing at the end of a tight rope with no footing to speak of one time when the Regulators had him for some deed he had been guilty of.

Of course Juan appreciated the service, but he appreciated himself the more, and if he got the chance to better Juan the Fox at the expense of the sharp he intended to do so.

He did not wish to harm the sharp, only to discover how much money he was going to make out of Miner St. John and to come in for his share too.

Now the Sharp from Texas was a dandy, so to speak, and with no confidence in a Mexican he decided to simply have the secret of Miner St. John all his own and so make it a real tragedy for Juan when the latter had expected to himself play a part.

So Juan, with no thought of treachery, took up his position, raised his rifle and waited.

He saw the sharp gain his position and wave to him.

It was the signal for him to be ready to pretend to fire upon the miner just one hundred yards distant from him, while the sharp was that far away from the Mexican.

One rifle cracked.

It was the sharp's, and with a stinging sensation in his side, Juan fell in a heap.

He was not killed, but had felt the bullet tear into his flesh.

He knew that the Sharp from Texas had fired to kill him, and he ground out oaths beneath his teeth most savagely.

He half-saw, but heard all that took place, and saw the sharp and the miner come toward him.

He could have sprung to his feet and bolted.

But Juan was revengeful.

His benefactor had become his bitterest foe, and he would be avenged upon him.

So Juan the Fox lay as silent as though dead; so motionless, so pale he was, in fact, that he deceived the Texan sharp.

They went away and left him.

"To be buried in the morning," he heard the sharp say.

The sun had set, the dark shadows of night fell upon the canyon and high, overhanging hills, and the two men had departed, leaving him lying upon the rocks dead, as they believed.

But Juan well deserved the name he had won as the Fox.

He was playing a foxy game of 'possum, and playing it well.

But in the darkness he arose, and stripping aside his coat, felt of his wound.

It had bled freely, and he took the ramrod of his gun and probed it.

To his delight the end of the ramrod turned upon the rib and came out half a dozen inches away from the wound.

The bullet had not entered his body, but had glanced and cut its way out.

A wild yell of joy broke from the lips of Juan, and seizing his rifle he slipped down from the rocks, sought the spring, and wetting pieces of his clothing which he cut off for the purpose, bound them, saturated with water, upon the wounds.

"Juan live yet very long.

"Kill sharp some day; other man, too, and be rich," he muttered in broken English, as he strode away in the darkness, apparently caring little for his wound, but everything for revenge.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LETTER FROM THE MINES.

In the suburbs of the City of Baltimore, in a cozy little cottage, half-hidden with vines and surrounded by a flower-garden, the wife and

daughter of Miner Gray St. John had made their home.

It was a pretty place, situated upon a hill which commanded a grand view of the distant city and the bay.

A little meadow-land stretched away in the rear, where a cow and staid old horse were pastured, a vegetable garden well tilled was to the left, and a lawn dotted with fine trees on the right, the flower-garden being in front.

An old negro and negress were the servants of the mother and daughter, and but for the fact that the loved husband and father was far away in the gold mines of New Mexico, facing deadly perils and working day after day for them, those two would have been most happy in their little nest.

When the first large remittance had come to her, Mrs. St. John, who had been boarding in the city, while Ethel was attending school, had gone out into the country one bright April morning and purchased the little place which she had seen advertised.

Then it was fitted up, furnished carefully and the negro man and his wife engaged to do the work, for Mrs. St. John determined to devote her time mostly to the education of her daughter.

A horse and phaeton were purchased for their pleasure, while Ethel also often went for a horse-back ride.

A piano was also purchased, some books, and those two who had lived in poverty for years began to feel that they were now living a life of luxury.

As they sat there upon the piazza one pleasant afternoon, Mrs. St. John looked strangely youthful for one who had a daughter almost her counterpart in size, and certainly in beauty of face and form.

She was the same lively, fearless Ethel Enders who had so bravely arranged the duel at the school-house in Maryland, between her boy lover Gray St. John and his rival, Hugh Hammond.

That was nearly a score of years before, and yet at thirty-eight Mrs. St. John was a very beautiful woman.

She had been true as steel to the man she had saved, and nursed back to life, becoming his wife while they were yet hardly more than children.

The duel she had witnessed in her early girlhood, when she saw her father fall, the duel she had seen at the school-house when Gray St. John was shot by Hugh Hammond, and the sorrows and hardships which had come upon her in her married life, had left no deep impress upon her lovely face.

Since his flight, no word had ever come of Hugh Hammond, and it was discovered that the vessel in which he had sailed from the Maryland shores had been wrecked and all on board perished.

And there by her watcher's side upon the piazza sat Ethel.

She was idly running her deft fingers over the strings of a guitar, and her attitude was graceful, her face beautiful.

A combined likeness of her handsome parents, she bid fair to be even more beautiful than her mother, while her physique, girl though she was, was perfect.

Suddenly a horn, winding a few notes, fell upon their ears, and springing to her feet Ethel cried.

"The postman! now for a letter from father."

Away she ran down to the gate just as a two-wheeled cart dashed up and the post driver handed her a letter, and sped on his way, winding his horn once more for the next cottage on the ridge that there was a letter for.

"From father!" cried Ethel, holding up the letter as she ran to the house, and breaking the seal eagerly she read aloud:

"CABIN LONESOME, GOLD DUST CANYON.

"Sunday, October 10th, 18—.

"MY DARLING DAUGHTER:—

"This is your day for a letter, and I am happy to verify my hopes expressed in my last letter to your sweet mother as a reality, for the mine 'pans out,' as we say here, richer than ever, and beyond my highest expectations.

"I must confess, however, it is owing in a great measure to my 'pard' Trent Baxter, of whom I have so often written, for he knows 'pay dirt' so well, and just where a vein should run and be found.

"A year's work here, I feel confident, will give us a fortune, while I can still work the mine under hired help and come to live with my loved ones.

"In fact those same loved ones shall now have a chance to travel, to see more of the world than it has been their lot thus far.

"Pard Baxter brought me your letter telling me how happy you were in your new home, and that your mother had paid for it and all in it.

"Also how you enjoyed your drives and rides, and that you were improving far more in your studies and music under your mother's teaching than ever before."

"I am delighted to know all this; but now, as you ask me to tell you of my life here, of my pard, Trent Baxter, and other strange characters we meet in this strangest of lands, I will do so; but I must come to a close here for the present as I see a horseman coming up the canyon, and Baxter is not here to entertain him. *Au revoir.*"

"FATHER."

CHAPTER XIX.

SOMETHING ABOUT NEW MEXICAN "PARDS."

RESUMING his letter upon another page, Gray St. John continued as follows:

"It is now night, my dear child, and I am alone in my cabin."

"As my visitor remained for some time it was too late for me to take my letter to the camps to be mailed, so it cannot go before next Sunday, unless Baxter should ride over to Devil's Ranch, as he often does, in which case I can send it by him."

"You know I devote my Sundays to letter-writing home, and carrying my letters to the mail, fifteen miles away, where I can head off the coach to Devil's Ranch."

"If I need stores I go to Devil's Ranch, thirty miles away, so you see I am quite isolated."

"My nearest 'neighbor' is twelve miles off, unless I include wolves and other 'varmints,' which are rather too neighborly."

"Our cabin is a most comfortable one, and we will be all right in it this winter, be it ever so severe."

"Baxter is one of the noblest fellows I ever knew, for he is always doing something for me."

"I wrote your mother how he refused to share equally in the mine with me, and since it has panned out—you see I use expressions familiar here—so well, he will only receive one-fifth, and frequently, when he strikes a large lump, he'll toss it over to me with the remark:

"That goes for Mrs. St. John." Or again:

"That's Miss Ethel's dot."

"It is useless to argue with him, for he will have his way."

"I sent your mother the sketches he so cleverly made of the canyon, its surroundings, the mine, our cabin, and the 'Two Pardes at Home,' so you have an idea of where I live."

"Baxter bears the name in New Mexico of the 'Sharp from Texas' or 'The Lone Star Sharp.'"

"Interpreted, this means a man who is 'no slouch,' which again interpreted means one who is not to be run over, who will stand up for his own and a comrade's rights and has the nerve to do it."

"He has had trouble here, and his quick and deadly aim, great strength and indomitable pluck have caused him to be feared, so I could not have a better comrade for protection."

"He may have his faults, but they are all of the head, not the heart, and except that he follows the custom of this community and gambles, I can find nothing to censure him for."

"I think he is a man who has had some deep sorrow, some romance in the past, but he never speaks of his troubles, and of course I never question him upon the subject."

"But he is a man of education, knows the world, and is the most companionable fellow I ever met, and I wonder how I ever lived alone as I did before we became pardes."

"But now let me tell you of my visitor of this morning."

"A visitor here is like angels' visits, few and far between."

"In fact, except an old hunter I met, and brought to my cabin for the night, the Mexican who tried to kill me, Baxter and the one who came this morning, not a soul has been near me."

"That Mexican we have never seen, or heard of, but we keep on the watch for him, as he may come back some time, and if he does, why it will be bad for him."

"Baxter has such confidence in his aim that he thinks the Mexican was mortally wounded, and crawled away to die somewhere; but I hope he escaped, if he will only let us alone."

"But again I must return to my visitor."

"I went out to find a youth, hardly more than seventeen, and the handsomest specimen of young manhood it was ever my pleasure to behold."

"He was simply perfect in form, and faultless in face, for he was as beautiful—I use the word correctly—as a woman."

"Now, don't laugh at my description of a young man, for it is a true one."

"Naturally you will say he is a fop, a Miss Nancy and all that; but this same handsome boy has a name in this country that he has won by deeds which no man can surpass."

"He was dressed in the picturesque Mexican costume, had small hands and feet, was as neat as though he had just stepped out of a bandbox, and yet armed to the teeth."

"His brown hair was curling, and fell below his shoulders, and he wore a red sombrero, gold-embroidered."

"In fact he was a dandy borderman, looking like the frontier characters one sees upon the stage."

"His horse was a splendid one, the Mexican saddle and bridle being gold-mounted, and gorgeous in the extreme."

"His weapons were also gold-mounted, and gained for him the strange name he has, which is the Gold Revolver Sharp."

"His name is Redfern, I believe, and he is a Texan, whose parents were massacred when he was

a mere boy by Comanches, so he is the deadly foe of Indians."

"He holds the position of scout at Fort Blanco, distant from here some eighty miles, and wanders at will, it seems."

"He came to see me to ask if I knew of any new settlers in the mountains, or strange miners coming in, while he said he was warning the gold-diggers of a band of outlaws who had been lately robbing coaches upon the trails, and also a few miners."

"This young man, so Baxter told me, had saved his life, was one of the best card-players in the mines, and the deadliest of shots, while as a horseman he had no superior."

"I had him to dinner with me, showed him yours and your mother's photographs, and enjoyed his visit immensely, though he made the strange request of me not to tell Baxter that he had been here, as he had a reason he would some day tell me."

"But I have written you such a long letter, my dear child, that I must close ere I tire you."

"Say to your mother that a letter to her shall follow, and in a couple of Sundays I will ship by stage another box of gold-dust to go to the bank to be placed to her credit, and it will double the other amounts sent thus far."

"With every good wish for my two dear ones,

" Lovingly,

"Your father,

"GRAY ST. JOHN."

"P. S.—Address now to me to care of Store-keeper Cloggett, Devil's Ranch, Fort Blanco Trail, New Mexico, for as Baxter goes quite often there, he brings any letters arriving for me, and I buy my stores from Cloggett."

Such was Miner St. John's letter to his daughter.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FORT SCOUT.

FORT BLANCO was an outpost under the command of a gallant United States cavalry officer, who had won the eagle on his epaulette by daring deeds, added to his skill as a soldier."

Colonel King had under his command a light artillery battery, a battalion of mounted infantry, and another of cavalry, in all about five hundred soldiers, along with the necessary hangers-on of an army outpost."

Then there were a dozen scouts, hunters and guides, so that the garrison was very well supplied."

The fort was on the trails leading out of Texas into New Mexico, and from Los Angeles to Santa Fe, while there were numerous other trails branching off from that point which gave it a central locality from which to throw troops to any place they were needed, either to keep down the red-skins in the Indian Territory, strike a blow at the Comanches and Apaches when they went upon the war-path, or to send a company into the mining country."

As a matter of course the country about Fort Blanco was a dangerous one."

Rogue whites, small bands of Indians, road-agents and outlaws in general were often seen upon the trails and life was held cheap by all of them, while to get gold was their only aim, and get it in any way possible."

The fort notwithstanding was a pleasant abiding place, for it was well located in a healthful country, with streams near, and its force could defend it, situated as it was, against twenty times their fighting number."

A number of the officers there had their families with them and altogether Fort Blanco was a favorite station."

Two stages passed there each week, going westward and returning eastward, and a wagon train was due each month, so that the soldiers did not consider themselves lonesome outside of the world in spite of their isolated station."

It was to Fort Blanco that the Revolver Sharp went after his return to Devil's Ranch, to discover that the Sharp from Texas had also left the New Mexico tavern."

Colonel King, the handsome and gallant commander of Fort Blanco, had just finished his supper when his orderly announced:

"Redfern, the Scout, sir."

"Ah! show him in, orderly," said the colonel, and a moment after the young scout entered."

"Sit down, Redfern, you look tired out."

"When did you arrive?"

"Five minutes ago, sir."

"And you are just off of another of your roving scouts, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, I have been in the mining country, colonel, and rode back rapidly to report that the road-agents are again on the trails."

"Ah! this must be looked to at once; but which hand is it, and where did you hear of them, Redfern?"

"I saw them, sir, and it is the band of Blue Jacket Bill, sir."

"Ah! that deserter again."

"We must catch and hang him, Redfern."

"Yes, sir, it would be well to do so."

"But you say you saw them?"

"Yes, sir, they had held up Mexican Joe's coach, and I was in chase of it for a purpose I will explain, when I dashed suddenly upon them."

"The Blue Jackets?"

"Yes, sir, and the coach too. I could not retreat, so waved and called to imaginary troops and rode on."

"Just your style, Redfern; but you were not alone?"

"Yes, sir, for I seldom have company, sir."

"The road-agents scattered at once, and I told Mexican Joe to dash on, which he did and he escaped them."

"Were there many passengers?"

"Half a dozen, sir, and they would have lost considerable, while there was a treasure-box on the coach."

"Another good deed to your credit, Redfern—Well, orderly?"

"A courier has arrived, sir, with these dispatches."

Colonel King took the official looking envelope, detaining Redfern who had arisen to go, and breaking the seal, said:

"Ah! from the manager of the stage company, scout, and hear what he says:

"I have the honor to report that Mexican Joe's coach was held up by road-agents, of the Blue Jacket Band at the Cedar Cliffs on its last run, and a treasure of great value, with the pocketbooks and jewelry of six passengers, were saved through the daring of a Fort Blanco scout known as the Revolver Sharp."

"But for this young man, boldly charging alone upon the road-agents, the stage company would have been heavy losers, and I am empowered to inclose the within check of one thousand dollars which I will ask you to be good enough to hand over to the person referred to, with the thanks of the company."

"Scout Redfern will doubtless report the affair to you, but from what Mexican Joe says of him, he will hardly give himself the credit he deserves."

"I have the honor to be, etc., etc."

"Now, Master Redfern, allow me to have the pleasure of handing over to you this check from the manager of the stage company, and to say that you richly deserve it."

"Pardon me, Colonel King, but I do not need the money, nor will I take a reward for having simply done my duty, and I would esteem it a favor if you would return it for me with my decision regarding it."

"But, Redfern, you are on a scout's pay and the company are rich, while you have saved them a large sum," urged Colonel King."

"No sir, I will not take it, as I do not need the money, and the paymaster will tell you I have not drawn a dollar of my pay since I came here for service a year ago."

"Why, colonel, it would pay somebody well to kill and rob me, for I carry a small fortune in the metal upon my saddle, bridle and weapons, not to speak of a few golden *orzas* in my pocket," and taking out a handful of twenty-dollar gold-pieces the youth jingled them together merrily and laughed in his light-hearted way."

"You are a strange boy, Redfern, and I wish I knew more of you, for you are a mystery to me, I frankly admit, and with all your happy-go-lucky manner I am sure that you are often a sufferer from some hidden cause."

The face of the youth changed instantly, flushed quickly and then grew pale, while he said with the air of one far beyond his years:

"We are all hypocrites, Colonel King, for no one knows us as we really are."

Then, quickly changing his manner to his free-and-easy style again, he continued:

"I have another report to make to you, sir, and one I cannot fathom."

"I will hear it, Redfern," answered the colonel, more and more impressed with the strange boy before him, and who was an unfathomable mystery to all in Fort Blanco."

CHAPTER XXI.

REDFERN'S REPORT.

REDFERN the Scout had come to Fort Blanco one night, a year before he is introduced to the reader, and made a report that a large band of Comanches were lying in wait for a wagon-train."

A force was sent under the boy's guidance, while scouts went along to see that no trap was intended, for the dashing-looking youth in his Mexican costume did not inspire confidence with all."

He led the force to the scene of the ambush, showing a wonderful knowledge of the country, the scouts said, and enabled them to reach a position to attack the Comanches in the rear."

The result was a complete panic for the Indians and the saving of the train, which would have marched into the trap that very day but for the youth."

When the fight was over the boy who had been in the thickest of it, had three scalps which he had taken, and he quietly remarked to Captain Plummer, who commanded the force:

"I always keep them, sir, to register."

"To register?" asked the surprised officer."

"Yes, sir, I have a contract for just so many, and the boy turned away."

Several days after he again appeared at the fort, and asked Colonel King to take him as a scout."

"You know the country well, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name, my lad?"

"Roy Redfern, sir."

"Are you a Mexican?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Ah, you live in the United States, so consider yourself an American?"

"I do not know, sir, what I am."

"You have parents?"

"The Comanches killed them, sir, and took their scalps."

"My poor boy! where were you living then?"

"In Texas, sir."

"Where have you been since then?"

"Wandering about, sir."
 "Why do you dress in Mexican attire?"
 "I like it, sir."
 "Do you know the mining country?"
 "Yes, sir, I have been all through there."
 "They gave me the name of the Gold Revolver Sharp in the mines."

"Why so?"
 "I believe because I never missed my aim, sir."
 "Well, Master Roy Redfern, you can report to Major Sam Hall, better known as Buckskin Sam, who is my chief of scouts."

"Yes, sir, he was with Captain Plummer when we went to the relief of the train."

"Yes, and Buckskin Sam said that you were as good as any scout he had, so you will report and be put on full pay from the day you started with Captain Plummer to save the train."

"Thank you, sir; but, I don't care much for the pay."

"How will you live without money?"

"I've got some money, sir," was the smiling reply and thus Redfern became a scout at Fort Blanco.

He proved himself a very valuable addition to the scouting force, and Colonel King gave him a kind of roving commission, going where he pleased, and time and again he brought in valuable information, of an intended Indian outbreak here, an outlaws' raid there, and other items important to be known.

There was not a better horseman at the fort, that was soon discovered, nor one who rode better animals, for the young scout's three were superior to those of Colonel King, that were so highly prized.

Then Redfern was a dead shot with rifle or revolver, though he never carried the former weapon, and he could throw a lariat equal to Buckskin Sam, which was saying a great deal.

To the surprise of the officers he was a good swordsman, while he also possessed the art of defending himself with his bowie-knife against a sword in skillful hands.

The mystery about the boy, with the stories told of him, made him a hero, and yet no one knew more of him than he cared to tell, while now and then a scout, or an officer would return from the mines and tell of strange tales told there of the Gold Revolver Sharp and that he was dreaded as a most dangerous youth by the miners, especially the most lawless among them.

Such was the youth who was now to make a second report to Colonel King, and who was as much, if not more, of a mystery to all in the fort as he was when a year before he had come there.

Without drawing any money from the paymaster he always dressed like an exquisite, and wore a costume worth a dozen officers' uniforms, while also he was never known, as he said, "to go broke."

"Well, Redfern, what other report have you to make, other than about the attack on the coach by Blue Jacket Bill and his band?"

"There's a woman in the case this time, sir," said Redfern with a smile.

"A woman, eh?"

"Yes, sir, for a strange lady arrived on the Santa Fe coach a week ago at the New Mexico in Devil's Ranch."

"A cheerful place, certainly, for a lady, scout."

"She seemed to find it so, sir, for she got into a game of cards in the evening, playing with a man of whom you have heard, the Sharp from Texas."

"Yes, and pleasant company she had?"

"She liked it, sir, and she got him to let her make a silent bet against him, and she won it too."

Then Redfern told of the gambling scene between the veiled woman and the Sharp from Texas, and how it had ended.

Of his own talk with the woman, for some strange reason he did not speak, but went on to tell how in following the coach to discover who she was he had saved it from the road-agents.

"Having heard the story of Mexican Joe of how the veiled woman left the coach, he had tried to track her, but losing her trail had returned to Devil's Ranch, to find Lone Star gone, for he had hoped to find out through him something about the woman, feeling sure that he must know who it was that had been so determined to take his life."

"Failing to find the Sharp from Texas, he had again gone and taken to the trail of the woman from where she had left Mexican Joe's coach."

"I at last struck the trail, sir, and discovered that every effort had been made to cover it up; but I followed it to the Rio Grande and am sure she went into Mexico; so I came back to report to you, as, if she did, she is a Mexican, and those with her were either Mexican troops or outlaws, sir."

"Well, Redfern, there is much in all this worth looking up, and you are the one to fathom it for me, only do not speak to any one else about the strange woman."

"I can, sir, follow the trail into Mexico, if you wish it."

"It is a most risky thing for you to do, Redfern."

"I do not mind the risk, sir, if I can discover who the woman is and why she came here with a large force, sir, for I forgot to say that the twenty masked men who met her in the coach were not one-half of those with her, for she joined two other bands equally as large on the way to the Rio Grande."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir, for I marked well their trails, and not a man less than sixty she had when she crossed the river."

"This is strange."

"And it is also, sir, that when Blue Jacket Bill held up Mexican Joe's coach, the first thing he asked for was the veiled woman, and they were in a rage at not finding her."

"Well, Redfern, the case is in your hands to ferret out, so begin when you please."

"I'll start to-morrow night, sir, and would not like any one to know that I have left the fort, for you know not who may be spies, sir."

"Very true, and you are right to act with the greatest caution."

The following night the Revolver Sharp, mounted upon his best horse, left Fort Blanco to once more take the trail of the Veiled Gambler.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON A WOMAN'S TRAIL.

REDFERN left the fort at midnight, going out quietly past the sentinel at the stockade gate, and rode a number of miles before he halted for a rest.

It was sunrise when he awoke and after breakfast he pushed on his way at a sturdy gait that threw the miles behind him.

So he kept on until he came to the ford of the Rio Grande where the veiled woman and her escort had crossed.

He did not hesitate about crossing, and seemed as much at home in Mexico as in the United States.

He had been several days away from the fort and yet the splendid large roan he rode seemed not in the least fatigued.

Halting at the hacienda one night he began in a cautious way to make inquiries about the veiled woman.

He could not expect to longer follow her trail, but he knew that she must have passed by that very hacienda, as there was no other way she could have taken from the ford.

After certain cautious inquiries, he learned that a cavalcade had passed and the ranchero said:

"You must mean the Lancero Queen, Captain Dolores!"

Redfern said, indifferently:

"Yes, that is her name, for I had forgotten it."

"I have a message for her which I am anxious to deliver, so would like to know where to find her, senor?"

"She is at her fort, as her ranch is called."

"Her fort?"

"Yes, if she is the one you seek, for it was Captain Dolores who passed here on the day you refer to, with her escort of Lanceros, which she commands."

"A woman command soldiers?" asked the youth.

"Yes, for she saved the frontier settlements from being wiped out by the Comanches, and held a force at bay with her cowboys until the troops arrived, directing all herse f, and for her gallant services the Government made her a Captain of Lanceros and she has uniformed and armed her own *vaqueros* at her own expense."

"She must have a number of *vaqueros*?"

"She has fully a hundred upon her three ranches."

"Is she so rich, then, senor?"

"Yes, she is very rich, but lives alone in a hacienda which she calls Fort Unknown, and not any one but her few faithful servants know what is within, and it is said that no one ever sees her face."

"That is the woman I am after, muttered Redfern, but aloud he said:

"Is she then so homely as to be afraid to show her face?"

"No, for it is supposed she is beautiful; but she made her vow never to reveal her face until she had accomplished a certain purpose and she has kept it as far as I ever heard."

"Has she no kindred, no friends, senor?"

"None that I ever heard of."

"She was the heir of an old ranchero who owned those three ranches and lived the life of a hermit, as she does."

"She came at night, from no one knows where, took possession and was known as the Veiled Unknown."

"She gives generously to charity but receives no visitors, and how she knew of the Comanche raid no one discovered; but she was prepared for them, warned the settlements and beat back the red-skins until the soldiers came, for which, as I have said, she was made a Captain of Lanceros, and is now known as Captain Dolores, the Black Nun, Lancero Queen and by several other names."

"She often leaves her home, senor, does she not?"

"Seldom, I believe; but then she goes with an escort of from twenty to fifty, of her *vaqueros*, all of whom are splendid riders and thoroughly armed."

"She must indeed be a strange woman, senor?"

"She certainly is, and I have an idea, though I may be wrong, that she goes alone sometimes across the Rio Grande and is gone for days and weeks in the United States; but you said you had a message for her?"

"I have a message for a veiled lady who was in the United States ten days ago, and whom I only had the description of to trace her by, as she crossed into Mexico with an escort of over half a hundred men."

"Then it is Captain Dolores you wish to see, though you'll find it no easy matter to do so, for she sees no one, unless it is a Government officer on business."

"Well, I can make the attempt at least, senor," was the response of Redfern, and when he retired that night in the pleasant room the hospitable ranchero had assigned him he made up his mind that he would see Captain Dolores before he left Mexico.

The next morning he went on his way, and a score of miles brought him in sight of a large hacienda situated upon a hill, with heavy timber about it, and all around prairie lands which were dotted

with herds of cattle, attended by numerous *vaqueros*.

The hacienda did indeed look like a fort, and had turrets at either corner, while immediately surrounding it were ornamental grounds.

A *vaquero* rode toward the scout as he advanced and halted in his path.

"Well, senor, what do you wish here?" he asked politely yet firmly.

"To see the Senora Dolores, senor, if you please," was the reply.

"Your visit is useless, senor, for Captain Dolores sees no one."

"Perhaps she will make an exception in my case, as I have important information for her."

"She makes no exceptions, senor, and if you will give me the news you bear I will see that it reaches her ears."

"No, I can tell only the Senora Dolores."

"You cannot tell her, senor, for you must not go nearer to the hacienda than you now are, and I obey orders only in demanding that you go on your way."

"Still the senora does receive a visitor now and then?" suggested Redfern.

"To whom do you refer, senor?"

"Government officers."

"Ah! Captain Dolores receives an official of the Government when occasion demands, and she expects one now."

"Are you an officer of the Government, senor?"

Redfern was tempted to say yes, and try that plan of seeing the mysterious Lady Captain; but he answered:

"No, I am not an officer of the Mexican Government," and with a salute he rode on his way muttering to himself:

"She expects an officer now, does she?"

"Well, he can come but one way, and I'll camp on the trail he must take."

"It's a bold game to play, but I'll risk it," and the young scout rode rapidly on the trail leading further into Mexico.

CHAPTER XXIII.

REDFERN'S PLOT TO WIN.

THE young Revolver Sharp was a youth of devices. He was as cunning as an Indian with all his courage, and he had a brain that was always busy.

Both the ranchero, with whom he had halted all night, and the *vaquero*, who had refused to allow him to go to the hacienda of the Lady Captain, had said that the Veiled Unknown received a Government official when he called at her house.

The *vaquero* had even said she was expecting an officer there, and more, had asked Redfern if he was one.

So the young scout made his way to a ridge through which the trail ran to the nearest fort to the hacienda of the veiled woman.

He argued that if an officer came, he would come via that fort, and so he went into camp on the trail, selecting a wild and picturesque spot in which to lie in ambush.

It was the afternoon of the second day, when he beheld, from his point of observation, which commanded a view for miles, a horseman coming along the trail.

Quickly saddling his horse, he mounted and rode forward to meet him.

As they approached each other, Redfern saw that he was a young officer, wearing the rank of a lieutenant of Lanceros, and he saluted him politely and drew rein.

The Mexican also halted, and Redfern asked politely:

"Are you the officer going to visit Captain Dolores at her hacienda, senor?"

"I am, senor."

Quick as a flash the Mexican was covered, and Redfern said slowly:

"Hands up, senor, or I will kill you! Obey, and your life is safe!"

The Mexican was completely caught off his guard, and there was something in the face of Redfern that caused him to promptly obey the command.

"Now, senor officer, upon my word I will do you no harm, as I will explain to you if you will only do my bidding."

"What have you to say?" was the stern question.

"First, I must disarm you—there! Now I will take your bridle-rein and you are to go with me."

"Whither?"

"Off the trail a short distance, for I have a snug hiding place."

"Come, for I do not wish to use force, or to make you obey by threats."

The Mexican offered no resistance, and Redfern led his horse back on the trail to where he had made his own camp.

There he ordered him to dismount, and having taken from his pocket a couple of pairs of manacles, slipped them upon his ankles and wrists.

"Now, Senor Officer, with your mission to the Lady Captain I have nothing to do, for that is not my business; but I desired an interview with her, and was unable to gain it."

"I am anxious to see her upon a matter of very great importance to her, and not even a letter will be taken to her from me."

"Learning that an officer of the Government was to visit her, I waited, and now have you in my power."

"This camp is not an unpleasant one, and I will have to ask you to remain until morning, while I borrow your horse and uniform."

"*Caramba!*" snapped out the Mexican; but Redfern continued:

"I do not intend to rob you of your clothes, nor of a single peso, but I do wish the use of your uniform in which I can visit the Lady Captain."

"Aha! you cannot do it, for you do not know the countersign," said the officer.

"Thank you for informing me that I had to have a password, señor, and you'll give it to me."

"Never!"

"Well, if you refuse I shall simply take you to the Comanche village and turn you over for funeral services according to their style, and if you give me the wrong password I will do so upon my return."

"I pledge you my word I will only use it to gain an interview with Captain Dolores, and that I mean to serve her, not to harm her."

"Take your choice, señor."

The Mexican quickly did so by saying:

"The countersign is *Day*, if you reach the hacienda in the night, and *Night*, if you arrive there in daylight."

"Thank you, and now as a proof that I mean you no harm, I will not search you, nor touch what dispatches you may have for Captain Dolores; but I must borrow your uniform, and your outfit, señor."

There was no use to fight against the inevitable and the Mexican yielded with what grace he could.

Redfern at once set to work to change clothes with him, hats and all, and found the uniform no bad fit for him.

Then he unsaddled his horse and staked him out, and giving his prisoner some supper told him he would return in time to give him his breakfast.

His long hair he pinned up under his uniform hat, and securing the prisoner so he could lie down and sleep upon his blankets, but not escape, he mounted the Mexican's horse and rode away.

It was just after nightfall when he rode up to a group of *vagueros* and was halted by them.

"I desire to see Captain Dolores, señor," he said politely.

"What name, señor?" asked the very *vaguero* he had seen the day before.

"*Day*," and as Redfern uttered the word he was ready to fire and fly if it was wrong.

"*Bueno*, señor! Ride on to the hacienda and you will be admitted on the password," said the *vaguero*.

Redfern promptly obeyed, and upon reaching the massive gateway in the adobe wall rapped upon it with his knife hilt.

"Who is it?" asked a voice within.

"A Government officer to see Captain Dolores."

"The countersign?"

"*Day*."

"Yes, señor, enter," and the gate was thrown open.

Dismounting he said to the servant who took his horse:

"Hold him in readiness, for I must return to-night."

"So soon, señor?"

"Yes, it is urgent," and he followed another servant who led him into the hacienda.

He had gained his point thus far, and he had the nerve to face whatever ordeal was before him, though he could not but admit to himself that he had taken terrible chances.

And for what?

To carry out the uncontrollable impulse he had to see that veiled woman again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAPTAIN DOLORES.

THE hacienda of the veiled woman seemed to be like the court of a prince, for servants were numerous, and all dressed in the rich Mexican costume.

Then there was an air of wealth and elegance upon every side.

A large plaza, or court, was in the center of the hacienda proper, and a fountain, the waters brought from the neighboring mountains in pipes, sent streams far up into the air, falling back with a rippling sound that was very soothing.

The plaza was full of beautiful flowers, a few trees, and a hammock was hung there.

On the inside of the building all around the plaza was a double balcony, affording a promenade, and on the outer side were also covered verandas, from which a grand view could be obtained.

The room into which Redfern was ushered was very large, exquisitely furnished and had in it a piano, a harp, Spanish guitar and a stand of music in English, French, Italian and Spanish.

There were many souvenirs of the chase scattered about, a well-dressed bear's head and robe, another of a buffalo, deer's antlers, birds of various kinds, with wolf and fox-skin mats.

In an adjoining room, through which the peon servant led the scout to meet his mistress, there were innumerable relics of Indians, bows, arrows, traps, and in fact whole red-skin outfits.

The next room was full of military trophies, but the young adventurer had only a passing glance at these as he walked through the highly lighted house, for the plaza was also as bright as noon-day, under the glare of many lamps, softened by a full moon.

Entering a fourth room, Redfern found himself in a chamber which seemed to be wholly of a past generation, for he appeared to have stepped into the halls of the Montezumas.

The furniture and all he saw there was of a time centuries before, and seated in the midst of the splendor of her surroundings was the veiled woman.

And she was still clad in black, and still heavily veiled.

Before her was a table of antique design, and upon it were a number of papers, an ink-horn, quill pens, and a human skull, serving as a paper-weight. But from head to foot the woman was veiled.

The servant left the visitor at the portal, and the veiled woman bowed in a dignified way, and said:

"Be seated, Señor Lieutenant, and let me see the orders you bring, when I will give into your hands what information I have gleaned; and—"

"Pardon me, senora, but before you say aught that you would not have a stranger know, permit me to present myself as the Gold Revolver Sharp, of Devil's Ranch."

A slight cry broke from the woman's lips, and she sprung to her feet, now for the first time really looking at her visitor, whom, as a matter of course, she regarded as one of the Government messengers in the habit of coming to see her at stated times.

"You are that beautiful boy," she said, as though thinking aloud, and then asked sternly:

"Why have you intruded here, señor?"

"Pardon the intrusion, senora, but I came to serve you, and being refused admission as I was, I changed my plumage for that of a Mexican officer of Lancers."

"Ah! you do wear the dress of a Mexican Lancer."

"It was that alone that gained me admission."

"The password?"

"I got that as I did this uniform, lady, by bravado."

"How did you know that the uniform would admit you here?"

"I learned that you received Government officers at certain times, so I lay in ambush for one and here I am."

"You killed him?" cried the woman excitedly.

"He is as alive as I am, senora, not in the least harmed, and if you will permit me I'll tell you just how I captured him."

"I will listen," and the woman resumed her seat, while Redfern told his story.

"And his papers?"

"He has them."

"You did not look at them?"

"Of course not, any more than I allowed you to betray yourself, if there was aught to betray."

"I sought you for a purpose and I have found you, so with your other affairs I have nothing to do."

"You are a strange boy."

"Thank you."

"But how did you find me here?"

"I trailed you."

"Impossible."

"No, I rode in after the coach in which you left, and found it held up by Blue Jacket Bill and his band, noted outlaws and road-agents who infest the trains from California to the Missouri, and Wyoming to Texas."

"Believing that I had others with me, the road-agents ran off and the coach went on."

"Then Mexican Joe the driver told me that the first demand of the outlaws had been for you."

"For me?"

"So he said, and they seemed enraged at not finding you, while they grumbled at having lost a great deal of money through missing you."

"This is strange."

"So I thought, and when Mexican Joe told me how you had left his coach, after paying your way to Santa Fe, I went back to find you."

"I lost your trail, so went on to Devil's Ranch to find the Sharp from Texas."

"Ah!"

"He had departed, so I again sought your trail, found it, and discovered where you had others awaiting you and had crossed the Rio Grande."

"Of course, lady, I crossed too, and unable to see you by fire means I tried foul, ambushed the lieutenant, rigged up in his clothes and here I am."

"So I see," and there was a world of meaning in the woman's words, few as they were.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MYSTERIOUS BADGE.

THE veiled woman seemed strongly moved at the coming of the youth.

Had he told her the truth, or did he know more than he admitted that he did?

Had he left the Mexican officer as he had said, or was he dead?

These thoughts troubled her, especially as she did not seem to understand just why he had come.

After awhile she asked: "And why have you sought me here, señor?"

"First tell me whose portrait that is on the wall there?" and Redfern's eyes were gazing with rapt intent upon a life-size portrait of a woman in full Mexican costume.

The face was one of marvelous beauty, though it was of a weird kind of loveliness that was attractive, yet to be feared.

"Why do you ask about that portrait?" the veiled woman somewhat nervously asked.

"I wish you would tell me whose it is?" persistently said Redfern.

The face of the portrait was that of a maiden of eighteen, and her form was the perfection of symmetrical grace.

The eyes gazed into the youth's as though the portrait was really flesh and blood, and he seemed to feel their strange influence, for he was fascinated with it.

"I think I have seen you before."

The woman started, for the words were not addressed to her, but to the portrait.

"Where have you seen me before?" asked the woman almost in a whisper, as though she answered for the portrait.

Seemingly now unconscious of her presence the youth had risen and stood before the magical painting, which was an exquisite work of art of an exquisite subject.

"I do not remember, lady, but I have seen you—"

perhaps in my dreams, for your face is one I cannot forget."

The woman had bent earnestly forward now and seemed to be enraptured by the scene, of the youth talking to the portrait, and again she asked:

"Tell me when and where you have seen me?"

The words came too abruptly and awoke Redfern from his reverie.

He regained his consciousness of the present at once, and said with a laugh:

"Pardon, lady, but I believe I was talking to that portrait, and it seemed to answer me."

"My young friend, that portrait is of one who was once very dear to me."

"But she is dead now, and I alone remain."

"Whose likeness did you think it was?"

"Your own!" came the quick reply.

"Mine?" and the voice was startled in its tone.

"I thought so."

"But you have never seen my face?"

"Then why should I recognize that portrait as yours?"

"But you could not without seeing my face."

"Why, the voice is the same as yours, lady."

"The voice of a portrait?"

"Ah! I forget, it was you that spoke."

"Boy, who are you?" and the woman's voice was full of pathetic misery now.

"I told you, lady."

The woman sighed and then said:

"Tell me now why you came here."

"I wished to know why Blue Jacket Bill wished to capture you, and what he knows about you."

"I wished to warn you against him, and to tell you that it is hardly safe for you to cross the Rio Grande with a force of men, your soldiers."

"I wished to know if it was not the Sharp from Texas who had lain in wait for you in the coach and pretended to be the band of Blue Jacket Bill."

"And more, I was anxious to have you tell me all you know of the Sharp from Texas, and why you called him Huascar Del Sol the other night at Devil's Ranch."

"And more, I will tell you that I have made a vow to hang that man some day, that Sharp from Texas, and if you can give me a clew against him to aid me, do so."

"That is why I have come here, senora."

The woman listened with the deepest interest to all that Redfern said, and for a while seemed lost in deep thought.

At length she said:

"I believe just what you say, señor, as to your tracking me here; but I hold you to all secrecy as to your finding me."

"As to Blue Jacket Bill, who sought me, I think his spies must have known who I was, if only as the Veiled Mexican, and thus given him the clew to get a large ransom through capturing me."

"The man you know as the Sharp from Texas I know as Huascar Del Sol, but until one year has passed, the demand made upon me that night at Devil's Ranch, I will say nothing, do nothing against him."

"If you discover that he is crooked, hang him."

"When you have done so, come to me."

"I will give you a badge that will admit you here when you seek me, yet come only when you know that man is dead, having died at the rope end, or when you need me."

"If the world goes hard with you, come to me, for yonder portrait shall be as an angel mother to you."

"Will you come to me when you need me?"

"I will," was the firm response of the young scout, who seemed strangely drawn toward this mysterious woman with the veiled face.

"I am content, and can afford to wait."

"Here, come nearer."

Redfern obeyed, and taking from beneath her veil a pin, she fastened it securely in the front of the scarlet sombrero of the Revolver Sharp.

He turned the sombrero in his hand and gazed at the signet.

It was a most peculiar design, set in a massive gold star and representing a human eye.

The white of the eye was of pearls, the blue represented by turquoise, and the pupil by a diamond.

"There is a reverse to the eye, señor," said the veiled woman as she saw him attentively regarding it.

He then saw that the star worked upon a pivot pin, the other side revealing another eye, only instead of the blue turquoise there was black onyx.

"That badge will admit you to this hacienda, señor, or to my presence wherever I may be."

"When you seek me through my people, advance with your right hand raised to your sombrero, halt and turn this eye on its pivot, revealing the black eye, and it will pass you without your uttering a word, it will cause your death if you use my secret unworthily, though, did I not trust you, I would not give it into your keeping."

"Again, señor, should you at any time in a crowd, be you where you may, get into trouble where aid is needed, place your hand to the eye and turn it on its pivot."

"Who could aid me on such a sign, lady?"

"Wait until you need aid and see."

"I will, and I thank you."

"Now, will you be my guest for the night?"

"No, I thank you, senora, for I left the lieutenant in somewhat cramped quarters," and Redfern laughed in his merry way.

"Yes, I forget; but I shall look for him early in the morning."

"If he fails to appear, senora, mine will not be the fault."

"Now let me bid you *buenas noches*, senora."

He bent low over the gloved hand she extended and then turned toward the portrait, threw it a kiss from the tips of his fingers and left the room and left the hacienda, wondering at his strange visit:

Two hours after he had set the Mexican free with the advice:

"If you follow me, señor, I shall kill you."

But the young officer seemed satisfied to get away with his life, his papers and his purse, and rode hastily off without thanks.

Redfern laughed at his haste and then turning his horse into another trail muttered:

"I have seen her."

"Now for the other shore of the Rio Grande."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RETURN FROM MEXICO.

REDFERN returned to Fort Blanco just one month from the day he left it.

As was his custom he came after nightfall, and he always left during the night.

Some scouts who were envious of him had made complaint to Buckskin Sam, their chief, that the boy was drawing good money for bad services.

They complained that he never had anything to do but ride about the country, was never on hand when wanted, and, dressed up as a dandy he was continually in the mining country gambling and winning a name as a desperado.

"The boy is spoilt and should be brought up with a round turn," they said.

Buckskin Sam asked them to make their complaint in writing and that he would submit it to Colonel King.

This they did, though they stated that they did not wish to see Redfern lose his place, only to do something to win his pay as a scout.

"I regret to submit this, sir, but I must do so at the request of my men, who seem to be envious of Redfern," said Buckskin Sam, and he handed over the complaint of the scouts against Redfern.

Colonel King read it through carefully and then said:

"Chief Hall, just say to your men if any one of them will match the services rendered the year past by Redfern, I will give them one year's pay out of my own pocket."

"He came here after rendering a service which was invaluable to the Government, not to speak of the massacre he prevented."

"He has been the means of arresting half a dozen outlaws upon whose heads prices were set, and in every case has turned the reward in to the Soldiers' Relief Fund."

"He has not drawn a dollar of pay since he came, and more, returned to the stage company a check for a thousand dollars sent him for saving a valuable treasure from capture by Blue Jacket Bill's band."

"Again, he has a string of scalps in his quarters numbering nine, and all taken in fair fight, and let a scout here match that record."

"You are aware that he has shot two of the most lawless men in the mines who were always causing trouble, and did so in self-defense."

"A few days ago I received a medal from the stage company for him, because he would not accept their pay, and two letters from passengers who were in the coach inclosing checks, which I know he will return."

"Redfern, let me further say has, never left this fort except with my knowledge and upon my service, and he is now absent on duty, and I much fear is a prisoner or dead, so say to these scouts if I hear any more of their complaints, I shall show up their records against this boy's."

"Colonel King, I am most glad to take back your words, sir, for I have in vain argued with my men that it was unmanly in them to vent their envy against a boy, and one who has done far more than a man's part," and Buckskin Sam returned with the colonel's message, which was a decided set-back upon the grumblers, and a cause of rejoicing at their discomfiture to those who had not joined in the complaint against the young Revolver Sharp.

That evening as Colonel King was passing his quarters, and meditating sending out a search-party for the long-absent young scout, the orderly announced:

"Redfern, the Scout."

Colonel King had really become very much attached to this handsome young scout and in his joy at his return stepped forward to meet him with extended hand.

"Redfern, my lad, I was just thinking of sending Buckskin Sam and his men to look you up, for I really began to fear you were dead."

"No indeed, Colonel King, I am all right, sir, only tired after a long ride of it."

"I am glad indeed to see you back, so sit down and tell me all about your trip."

Redfern took the seat offered him and then the colonel said:

"You have been to Mexico of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"I felt sure that you would do so."

"But with what result?"

"I saw the veiled lady, sir."

"Ah! she is a Mexican then?"

"I suppose so, sir, for her home is there."

"On the Rio Grande?"

"No, sir, a day's ride in the interior."

"What is she?"

"I do not know, sir."

"You saw her face this time?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"This is strange."

"She was veiled, as before, and lives a kind of

hermit life in her hacienda, having a large ranch and many cattle."

"I know little about her, sir, but do know that she has some bitter grudge against the Sharp from Texas and came to the mines to take his life."

"Failing in this, and pledged not to take his life for one year, as you remember I told you, sir, she will not tell aught she knows against him, or do anything to help me ensnare him for that time."

"If, after a year I have not entrapped him, then she says that she will help me, and that means his conviction I am sure."

"She calls him by what must be his real name, Huascar Del Sol, and she has vowed to take his life, and if I do not bring him to the gallows she will."

"And of Blue Jacket Bill?"

"She seems to know nothing, and says that he doubtless sought to capture her to get a large ransom for her return."

"What had she to say of the force she brought into the United States with her?"

"They were her people, sir, and brought for her protection in case she should need them."

"Well, Redfern, you have done well; but we must hang this Sharp from Texas, if he is the man you think he is, without the aid of the veiled woman."

"Yes, sir, the thing for me to do is to get the proof against him, and then act, and I am sure if I catch him, there are others who are playing the same game with him who will also fall into the trap."

"Have you been to the mines lately?"

"I came through the mining country, sir."

"Did you find the Texan sharp there?"

"No, sir, but I heard that he had become pards with a miner up in the Yellow Canyon country, but I did not have time to go by there, so will make a trip especially in a few days."

"Yes, do so, and I begin to feel as you do, that when we lay hands upon one or two of these men we will catch the leaders of the road-agents, and do much to end coach and train robbing in this part of the country."

"But have you noticed any sign of Indians of late?"

"They are becoming bolder in their hunting excursions of late, sir, and that always means that they are hungry to be on the war-path again."

"So Buckskin Sam reported, and I shall send some cavalry scouting about their villages to hint to them that we are watching them pretty closely; but you look tired, so had better go to bed and rest."

"By the way, here are some letters for you, or rather for me with inclosures for you."

They were the letters from the two passengers sending checks for the young scout in return for what he had saved them by his dash upon the road-agents.

Redfern's face flushed as he read them, and he said:

"I am going to trouble you again, Colonel King, to return the checks with my thanks, and say that I never accept pay for services thus rendered."

"You will not accept the checks then?"

"No indeed, sir," and with a salute Redfern left the colonel once more to his meditations, which, it is needless to say, were most complimentary to the young scout.

The next morning the grumblers among the scouts were surprised to see Redfern again at the fort; but if he was aware of their complaint against him he did not show it by his manner, which was as genial and cheery to them as to those who were friendly to him.

After a rest of several days the Gold Revolver Sharp again left the post, and this time his visit was to the cabin of Miner Gray St. John.

CHAPTER XXVII.

REDFERN MAKES A VISIT.

THE visit of the young Gold Revolver Sharp to Miner Gray St. John has been told in the letter of the miner to his daughter Ethel, which has been given.

The scout had a motive in calling upon the miner. It was to find out more about the Sharp from Texas, if he could—to corner him, in fact.

For some reason, from the very first, Redfern had decided that Trent Baxter was a villain.

He believed him to be more than the gambler he appeared to be on the surface.

In fact, Redfern connected him in some way in his mind with outlawry.

He supposed that when he captured Blue Jacket Bill, he would find the Lone Star Sharp in the same company.

The truth was that Redfern was a detective scout, but his being employed by Colonel King in a Secret Service capacity, was known to the youth and his commander alone.

The colonel had decided that in Redfern he had the one to break up the lawless bands in the mining country, and infesting the trails, and so he had told the young scout to go about it in his own way, and this he proceeded to do.

He had watched about the canyon where St. John's cabin was, until he saw the Lone Star Sharp take his leave.

Then he had sought an interview with the miner. He had expected to find in Miner St. John a man who was an out-and-out villain.

The one who came to greet him with a kindly smile and hospitable manner was tall, well-formed, and with a dark beard and long hair, a few silver threads on either temple.

A fine-looking man he was, in a neat suit, and the air of a refined gentleman.

He greeted the youth pleasantly, looking him squarely in the eyes, and asking him to stake his

horse out and stay to dinner, the two were soon in friendly converse.

Redfern, young as he was, could read the human face well.

He understood human nature, and he felt that he had made a grievous mistake about the miner.

He urged him to talk of himself, and soon knew the history of Gray St. John, who had nothing to conceal.

Then he asked about the Lone Star Sharp, and was told how the two had met.

St. John gave the Sharp from Texas a good name, told how he had refused what he had offered him, and how true a friend he was to him.

At dinner the youth ate heartily, for he was given a good meal, and the miner was a good cook.

Then the miner was a good host, and besides Redfern had fallen in love at sight with the photograph of pretty Ethel St. John.

"I have to ask you the favor, Mr. St. John, not to speak of my visit to you to the Sharp from Texas."

"Now, I cannot explain my reasons, but at another time I will do so, and I trust you can do as I ask of you?"

"Certainly, Master Redfern, with pleasure, for I feel that you have some good motive, and I fear that you and my friend Baxter are not just good friends, and I am sorry."

"He is a good fellow, when you know him, and I hope he will someday give up his love of gambling, for outside of that I can find no fault with him," was St. John's reply.

Then Redfern took his leave, promising to call again, and he firmly meant to do so.

He rode along slowly and seemed to be lost in deep thought.

He left Gold Dust Canyon behind him and took the trail through Yellow Canyon, where there had once been a mining camp, for great expectations had been held of the country thereabout.

But the expectations had not been realized and Devil's Ranch had become the center of attraction in place of Yellow Canyon City as it had then been known.

A few cabins stood here and there scattered about, and the place was desolate in the extreme.

The scout had been through there before and knew it to be deserted, so was now somewhat surprised to see a man come out of a cabin on the hill slope and advancing down into the trail await his coming with the air of one who had business with him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FOX MAKES AN ACCUSATION.

"WELL, señor, what do you wish?"

The question was asked by Redfern, who was on his guard to meet a friendly advance, or a foe, and the one he addressed stood in the trail beyond him, his hands raised above his head without the asking.

It was the one who had come out of the cabin or the mill and stood in the trail awaiting the approach of the Gold Revolver Sharp.

"You are the Revolver Sharp, señor?" asked the man.

"So they call me."

"You speak Spanish?"

"Yes, as I do English."

"Good! I can talk to you in an honest tongue," returned the man, in the Spanish language.

"What have you to say to me?"

"I am Juan the Fox."

"Ah, I have heard of you as a great villain."

"Señor, do not believe all you hear, for you have heard of the Sharp from Texas as a good fellow."

"Yes, but I don't believe it of him—he's not guilty of that charge."

"I know him to be a rascal."

"Well, it is money in your pocket to prove it."

"I work now for revenge, señor," was the savage reply.

"Money makes a very nice sauce for revenge; but then a man who hates another can never tell the truth about him."

"I can, señor."

"What have you to tell?"

"You are a Government scout?"

"Yes."

"From Fort Blanco?"

"Yes."

"He hates you?"

"Many do that—all rogues, in fact, do."

"He lives only for gold?"

"Yes; a great many others do the same."

"I can tell you how he gets it."

"I know."

"How do you think, señor?"

"He gambles and does some mining."

"His mining is a blind."

"You know this?"

"Yes, señor."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone to Devil's Ranch."

"Ah! but I have kept my eye on him, for he sought to kill me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, señor."

"Do you think that I do not recognize you as one I thought I had killed months ago? I only got a glimpse of your face that night, my foxy friend, but I have not forgotten you. Raise your sombrero and let me see the wound I gave you."

The Mexican obeyed, while he returned:

"You did right, señor, for I sought to kill you, but you were the quickest with your gun. But, I played dead and so got away."

"Why did you seek to kill me?"

"I was paid to do it."

"Who was the purchaser?"

"Blue Jacket Bill."

"Ah!"

"It is true, senior; but I have no feeling against you for that shot though I have against the Sharp from Texas, for he led me into a snare, pretending I was to help him, and he shot to kill me and thus silence my tongue."

"It was when he went parls with the miner up Gold Dust Canyon, but his bullet glanced on my rib—it struck me just here. I got away from him and he has dreaded me ever since."

"Now, senior, I will get my revenge, for I will tell you who he is."

"Well, out with it, my man."

"He is Blue Jacket Bill, the chief of the road-agents!"

The youth fairly started at the information, and the Mexican saw that he had made an impression.

"I half suspected it," muttered the Revolver Sharp.

"I know it, senior."

"Give your proof."

"You will not harm me if I tell you?"

"No."

"You will swear to let me go free if I tell you all I know?"

"It's a bargain."

"I will tell you then, senior."

"Out with it at once!"

"I was a member of the band."

"You look it."

"Yes, senior, I belonged to Blue-Jacket's Band."

"Why did you leave it?"

"I was afraid he would kill me."

"You were wise to desert; but you declare that this man known as the Sharp from Texas is no more nor less than the robber chief, Blue Jacket Bill?"

"Yes, Senior Scout."

"He has now gone to Devil's Ranch, you say?"

"Yes, senior."

"Then come there with me and I will arrest him upon your charge—nay, no harm shall befall you, and you shall be free to go, then."

Juan did not like the idea, but the youth had enforced his request by drawing his revolver; so the Mexican obeyed orders, walking on ahead of Redfern's horse.

It was night when they reached the New Mexico inn, and going to a room with the Mexican, Redfern asked Landlord Du Val if the Texas sharp was there.

"He is playing in the saloon now, Senior Redfern," was the answer.

"Landlord Du Val, follow me and keep your gun on this Mexican, letting it go off if he attempts to do the same," ordered Redfern, promptly.

"What's up, Revolver?"

"Come and see," and the Revolver Sharp led the way to the saloon.

The Sharp from Texas was there, gambling heavily. Walking up in front of him, where he sat at the table, Redfern suddenly covered him with his revolver, and said sternly:

"Senior, I accuse you of being Blue Jacket Bill, the road-agent chief. Hands up, quick!"

The Sharp from Texas obeyed promptly, raising his hands above his head.

His face paled slightly, but he said coolly:

"I always obey the man who has the drop on me, senior, while of all men I wish no quarrel with you, who saved my life."

"But who brings this ridiculous charge against me?"

"This man, Juan the Fox."

"Ah! I supposed I had killed him once, when I found him about to fire upon a miner pard of mine up above Yellow Canyon; but, he escaped, it seems, with his life, and now in revenge brings this charge against me."

"It is true, Senior Scout, he is Blue Jacket Bill," cried the Fox, excitedly.

"Hang him!" came from a hundred throats, and a movement was made toward him.

But the Revolver Sharp turned upon the crowd.

"Don't press me, gentlemen, for I arrest this man in the name of the Government, and he is my prisoner."

"Show your officer's shield," said a commanding voice.

In an instant, having none, it came to Redfern to silence all by showing the badge on his red sombrero, the double-eyed insignia, given him by the veiled woman; so he raised his hand and instinctively turned the pin on its pivot:

At once half a dozen voices cried out:

"The Secret Service Badge of the Government!"

"Respect it, men," cried another voice.

Redfern had won, for the crowd fell back; but he was amazed, for he knew that there were those present who owed allegiance to Captain Dolores, the veiled woman.

"Men, this man is only accused, not proven guilty, so let the law deal with him. Come, senior, you are my prisoner," and the Revolver Sharp led the Sharp from Texas out of the saloon.

Half an hour after he was on his way to Fort Blanco with his prisoner in irons, while behind followed Juan the Fox as a guard, well mounted and armed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FALSE CHARGE.

The young Revolver Sharp arrived safely at Fort Blanco with his prisoner, and at once the barracks rung with his praises, for alone he had captured the celebrated outlaw chief, Blue Jacket Bill.

Juan the accuser, proved conclusively to many that there was no mistake, but he was wise enough not to give it away to others that he knew the outlaw from having served under him.

Of course the capture of the bandit meant his death at the rope's end. He was soon to be tried, which trial would result in his being found guilty.

But one evening a horseman arrived at the fort and asked to see Colonel King.

At that time Redfern was with the commandant, who intended sending him off for certain witnesses against the Sharp from Texas.

The stranger on being admitted proved to be a large man dressed in uniform pants, with a gold stripe, a slouch hat encircled by a gold cord, and a blue jacket trimmed with lace and brass buttons. He wore a belt to which hung a saber, and a pair of revolvers. Top boots with spurs adorned his feet, and he had a full beard and long hair.

He might be a soldier courier, or a scout according to his looks.

"Well, sir?" demanded Colonel King, with a piercing glance at him, "where are you from and on what business?"

"I have come to tell you, Colonel King, that you have made a grave mistake—that that young man arrested the wrong man for Blue Jacket Bill!"

"Do you speak the truth?"

"I do, sir."

"You of course bring proof?"

"The best in the world sir."

"Show it."

"I am Blue Jacket Bill!"

The words were uttered with the greatest calmness and Colonel King sprang to his feet and stepped closer to the man.

"Do you mean this?"

"Look at the man accused and your prisoner, and note how closely we resemble each other. That is what deceived the Mexican, for my men seldom saw me by daylight, and never without being in disguise."

"See, this beard is false, as also I wear a wig. Do you observe?" and the man took off a perfect fitting false beard and his wig of long hair.

Then his face stood revealed, clean shaven, and his hair cut close.

"Why do you give yourself up, sir, may I ask, when your doing so condemns you to the gallows?"

"Well, colonel, I never believe in death until it comes, and I owe my life and much more than I can ever tell to Trent Baxter, the man accused of my crimes."

"He is not a saint, I admit, but he is not a lawless man, and I will not see him die when I can save him, for sooner or later I must go the way of all flesh, so what matters a few more days, months or years?"

"Send for a guard, Colonel King, and have me put in irons. I warn you that I shall escape if I can."

"Redfern?"

"Yes, Colonel King."

"A great mistake has been made here?"

"It would seem so, colonel."

"I must release the man Baxter."

"I do not see how you can do otherwise, sir."

An officer was sent for, the situation explained to him, and the self-confessed robber was led away to be put in double irons.

Soon after the Sharp from Texas came to thank the colonel, refused his invitation to pass the night at the fort, and departed with the remark:

"I hold no ill-will toward you, Redfern, for the mistake was well intended."

Then he departed, and Redfern went out to find Juan the Fox.

But that worthy had disappeared most mysteriously.

When the sun arose Colonel King sent for the young scout.

The orderly returned with the report that he had left the fort with his three horses, and traps, and leaving a letter addressed to the commandant.

The letter was as follows:

"COLONEL CHAS. KING:—

"MY DEAR SIR:—You have always been a good friend to me, and I go to prove my appreciation of your many kindnesses."

"I cannot believe that the self-accused man is Blue Jacket Bill; I still believe that Trent Baxter is guilty."

"I take the trail to see if I am right or wrong, and some day I hope to report to you that I was not deceived in my man."

"I am also anxious to find that Mexican, Juan the Fox, once more."

"Please do not put me down as a deserter, but as on special duty, and oblige."

"Yours with respect and gratitude,

"ROY REDFERN,

* Secret Service Scout, U. S. A."

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

LONG months after the note left for Colonel King was received, the mail brought to Fort Blanco a somewhat bulky package addressed to the commandant.

"By Caesar's ghost! it is from Redfern, my Boy Scout!" cried the colonel, and he eagerly devoured the contents of the letter, which in the main was as follows:

"I have heard how a party of settlers from Texas came to Fort Blanco, and told you that the prisoner you held was not Blue Jacket Bill, but a madman, the son of an old ranchero there, who had all kinds of delusions and had pretended to be the noted outlaw chief, and thus got him out of your hands."

"But, it was a trick, for they were not settlers, respectable as they appeared, and the old white-haired man who claimed his son, was paid for doing so."

"They were outlaws who played the bold game to

release their officer who, to save the chief, had declared himself Blue Jacket and thus got a large reward for the great risk he ran."

"The chief, Trent Baxter, no one saw about the mines after the night he left the fort; but I followed his trail, and know that he killed Miner St. John and then sought out his wife as the best friend of the murdered man and would have brought ruin upon them had I not thwarted him."

"I tracked him to Colorado and I send you herewith the official papers of the execution there by law of one, Hugh Hammond, alias Trent Baxter, alias the Sharp from Texas, alias Blue Jacket Bill the road-agent chief of New Mexico."

"The official documents, signed and sealed, will show you that I was right, after all."

The colonel hastily glanced over the papers sent and cried:

"Bravo for the boy! He was right, after all, and I shall write to him to return here, at once."

Then the colonel continued the letter:

"Having fulfilled my mission, Colonel King, for that man led the Comanche band that took the lives of my parents, I shall go to Mexico, where I have a property that all along has paid me a liberal income, and where I will visit that mysterious woman who has written to me to come and be her adopted son, and offering inducements I fear I can not resist."

"But on the way I shall have the honor of seeing you, as Miss Ethel St. John, the daughter of the murdered miner, since her mother's death has made me her sole guardian, and I desire to look after the working of her mine in Gold Dust Canyon, which is panning out richly, for her."

Six weeks after the reception of this letter, Roy Redfern came to Fort Blanco on his way to Mexico, and the reception he met with made his heart glad.

That he could become Ethel's guardian and not fall in love with her the reader readily surmises, and so, when "Captain Dolores," who was the secret leader of a Mexican conspiracy, which never struck the blow intended, became his adopted mother, Ethel also was included as a daughter, and Senora Del Sol, as she was afterward known, sought a home for life on the American side of the Rio Grande, where Roy Redfern afterward won fame as a colonel of Texas cavalry in the Confederate Army.

THE END.

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Two Views of Life. A Colloquy. For two females.
The Rights of Music. For two females.
A Hopeless Case. A Query in Verse. Two girls.
The Would-be School-Teacher. For two males.
Come to Life too Soon. For three males.
Eight O'clock. For two little girls.
True Dignity. A Colloquy. For two boys.
Grief too Expensive. For two males.
Hamlet and the Ghost. For two persons.
Little Red Riding Hood. For two females.
New Application of an Old Rule. Boys and girls.
Colored Cousins. A Colloquy. For two males.

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The Fairy School. For a number of girls.
The Enrolling Officer. For three girls and two boys.
The Base-ball Enthusiast. For three boys.
The Girl of the Period. For three girls.
The Fowl Rebellion. For two males and one female.
Slow but Sure. For several males and two females.
Candle's Velocipede. For one male and one female.
The Figures. For several small children.
The Trial of Peter Sloper. For seven boys.
Getting a Photograph. For males and females.
The Society for General Improvement. For girls.
A Nobleman in Disguise. Three girls and six boys.
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A Hard Case. For three boys.
Ghosts. For ten females and one male.

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America to England. Greeting. For two boys.
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Coriolanus and Aufidius.
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undred Years to Come. For boy and girl.
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ove the Skies. For two small girls.
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ry Wishes. Several characters, male and female.
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rting Melinda. For three boys and one lady.
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ecedents. For three gentlemen and three ladies.
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ttle Tramp. For three little boys.
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aken Identity. For two males and three females.
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